

St Nicholas CofE VA Primary School

Church Green, Harpenden, AL5 2TP

Inspection dates 15–16 November 2012

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	Good	2
Achievement of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Leadership and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- Pupils make good progress in all key stages because most of the teaching is good.
- They make excellent progress in reading, and good progress in writing and mathematics.
- Standards at the end of Year 6 are consistently above average.
- Pupils behave well and have a good understanding of personal safety.
- Attendance is consistently above average.
- Senior leaders are well aware of the school's strengths and weaknesses, and work closely with staff and the governing body to make sure it keeps on improving despite the difficulties caused by the high number of senior leaders and teachers who have joined or left since the last inspection.
- The school website is easy to use and gives parents and carers detailed up-to-date information.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- The improvements made to teaching are not yet reflected in all lessons.
- Boys do not do as well as girls in writing and mathematics, and more-able pupils are not always given hard enough work.
- Teachers do not use modern technology enough to make lessons stimulating.
- There is too much in the school development plan for it to be fully effective in helping the school to improve, and although senior leaders check lessons regularly they do not use the results enough to fine-tune improvements in teaching and learning.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 15 lessons, of which two were joint observations with the headteacher and deputy headteacher. In addition, the inspection team made a number of other shorter visits to lessons and attended two assemblies.
- Meetings were held with members of the governing body, staff, groups of pupils and the local authority representative.
- Inspectors observed the school’s work and looked at a wide range of documentation, including the data the school has collected on pupils’ attainment and progress, procedures for keeping pupils safe and the school development plan. They heard some pupils in Years 2 and 6 read.
- Inspectors took account of the 61 responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) in making their judgements.

Inspection team

David Wynford-Jones, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Jackie Jackson-Smith	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The school is smaller than the average primary school.
- The large majority of the pupils are of White British heritage. Very few speak English as an additional language, and no pupils are currently at the early stages of learning English.
- The proportions of pupils supported at school action, and at school action plus or through a statement of special educational needs, are below the national averages.
- The proportion of pupils supported by additional funding (the pupil premium) is well below the national average for primary schools. Very few are known to be eligible for free school meals.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.
- Since the last inspection, there have been five headteachers and significant changes in the teaching staff; the current headteacher has been in post since January 2010.
- There is an after-school club (The Club) on the school site, but it is privately run and was not included in this inspection.
- Religious education is subject to a separate inspection, last carried out on 23 October 2012.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise the quality of teaching to outstanding by:
 - making sure that the recent initiatives to improve teaching are applied in all lessons
 - focusing lesson observations and the resulting feedback to teachers more sharply on the impact teaching has on pupils' learning
 - using information and communication technology more effectively to stimulate and involve pupils more in their learning in all subjects.
- Accelerate pupils' progress in writing and mathematics by:
 - using assessment information consistently well to plan more demanding work for the more-able pupils, and to make sure that boys make as much progress as girls.
- Make the school development plan a more useful tool for school improvement by:
 - reducing the number of priorities and initiatives
 - reviewing the way in which the impact of the actions taken is evaluated, to make sure they are precisely linked to improving pupils' attainment and progress.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is good

- Pupils make good progress and achieve well. Children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with skills and knowledge in line with, and sometimes above, those expected for their age. By the end of Year 6, pupils' attainment is consistently above average in reading, writing and mathematics. Standards in reading are usually higher than those in writing and mathematics.
- Children settle well into the Reception class and quickly establish good relationships with each other and adults. They develop their social and communication skills well and make at least the expected rate of progress in all areas of learning.
- By the end of Year 2, pupils' skills in speaking, listening and reading are well established. They read with confidence at a level above that expected for their age. They use phonics (the sounds that letters make) and clues in the text confidently to read unfamiliar words. Pupils write for a range of purposes. They have a good range of vocabulary and use basic punctuation accurately. In mathematics, pupils are developing their understanding of number well and use a suitable range of mathematical terms to explain their thinking.
- By the end of Year 6, pupils are reading at levels well above those expected for the age. They talk knowledgeably about their favourite authors and can explain clearly their likes and dislikes in different books. They read with expression and rarely stumble over words when reading aloud. They know their friends' reading preferences and recommend books to them.
- Pupils are developing their writing skills well. Occasionally, common words are spelt incorrectly and some pupils do not use adjectives, alliteration, similes and metaphors confidently. Some pupils do not let their imagination run freely when writing.
- In mathematics, pupils have a good understanding of number. Older pupils are able to find the lowest common multiple and translate fractions into decimals. Some pupils, particularly the more able, do not reach the standards they are capable of. For example, in 2012 no pupil gained the higher National Curriculum Level 6 in the Year 6 national mathematics test.
- Girls tend to make quicker progress and reach higher standards than boys in writing and mathematics. This is because teachers do not always plan work that motivates the boys to the same extent. Disabled pupils, those with special educational needs and those known to be eligible for pupil premium funding benefit from good help and guidance, and the work set for them is matched closely to their ability levels. This enables them to make good progress.

The quality of teaching is good

- Teaching is effective. Teachers use their good understanding of how pupils learn to ensure they make good progress.
- Teachers have responded enthusiastically to initiatives by senior leaders to ensure that all lessons are taught effectively. The agreed approaches include identifying and sharing what pupils are expected to learn by the end of the lesson, and making sure that the work is set at the right level to challenge groups of different abilities and lessons proceed at a brisk pace. These features were seen in many lessons, but are not yet routine practice in all lessons.
- Teachers show good subject knowledge and link subjects together well so that pupils can see

the relevance of their learning. Teachers encourage pupils to become independent readers, make choices and read regularly, but do not use information and communication technology widely in their lessons. For example, they rarely encourage pupils to interact with the electronic whiteboards, or use them to enrich lessons with video clips.

- Most lessons are well planned. Teachers usually convey high expectations of work and behaviour. They generally use assessment information to match work closely to the needs of most pupils, although they do not always demand enough from some of the more-able pupils, especially in mathematics.
- Potentially vulnerable pupils, disabled pupils and those identified as having special educational needs are fully included in class activities. This reflects the school's positive approach to breaking down barriers to learning and making sure all pupils have an equal opportunity to succeed.
- Pupils receive regular feedback on their work. Detailed marking in pupils' writing books gives them clear guidance on how to reach their targets. Pupils are encouraged to respond to the teacher's comments. This helps to ensure the pupils learn from their mistakes and the advice offered.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- Pupils are proud of their school and keen to promote its values of respect for others. Pupils are polite and routinely demonstrate good manners as they move around the school, for example by holding the door open or standing back for adults to pass through. They take a pride in the environment and ensure that displays and equipment are treated with respect.
- Pupils get on well together in lessons and around the school. Incidents of bullying of any kind, such as name-calling, fighting, racial, religious and cyber-bullying, are very rare. Pupils say that if an incident occurred, it would be dealt with quickly and fairly.
- Pupils know how to keep themselves and others safe and have a good understanding of potential dangers, for example when using computers to access the internet, or when leaving school and crossing local roads.
- Pupils' attendance is consistently above average. They enjoy coming to school and taking responsibility.
- Many aspects of pupils' behaviour are exemplary, but not enough lessons fire pupils' interest and enthusiasm to make sure that all pupils consistently and diligently apply themselves to their work. Nevertheless, pupils' good behaviour and positive attitudes to learning contribute much to their good progress and developing social skills.

The leadership and management are good

- Senior leaders and the governing body work together well. They brought stability to the school following a period of uncertainty in its leadership, and share a good understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development. They know what needs to be done to improve the school and the route to take. This is being embarked on with enthusiasm and commitment.
 - The detailed school development plan is based on an accurate evaluation of the school's
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performance. The priorities for improvement are appropriate but there are too many initiatives and actions. There are some good examples where the impact of the actions can be evaluated against pupils' attainment and progress, but this is not consistent throughout the document.

- Staff have responded positively to the initiatives to bring about improvements. Teachers' responsibilities have been reviewed and 'curriculum teams' created. This has involved all members of staff in the development of the school and, given the small number of staff, minimised the impact of any member being absent for any length of time.
 - Teachers are keen to develop their professional skills and have attended courses and training sessions. This has led to greater consistency in the quality of teaching and improvements in the rate of pupils' progress. The school's assessment records show that pupils' progress has accelerated in the last 12 to 18 months.
 - The headteacher and senior teachers observe lessons regularly. They do not use their findings thoroughly enough to check the full impact of teaching on learning, but they do analyse the results of tests and assessments well, and discuss pupils' progress in the termly meetings held with teachers. The headteacher uses the resulting information appropriately to help the governing body decide if teachers should receive a salary increase.
 - The local authority provided good support during the period of uncertainty in the leadership of the school. Since then there has been a change in local authority personnel, but the new adviser is working well with the school.
 - **The governance of the school:**
 - The governing body supports and checks the work of the school well, and makes a good contribution to improving it despite the over-complicated improvement plans. Governors are frequent visitors and are developing their expertise through regular attendance at courses. The Chair of the Governing Body meets each term with key staff to review the progress of potentially vulnerable pupils, disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs. Their discussions include how well additional funding such as the pupil premium is being used to improve achievement for eligible pupils, for example by supporting pupils on a one-to-one basis to accelerate their progress in mathematics. Assessment records show that good progress is being made in closing the gap in performance. The governors have a good understanding of how the school's budget is being used, and are satisfied that any additional funding is being spent appropriately. They responded promptly to the recent changes in teacher appraisal and capability procedures, and updated the related policy for the start of the autumn term. A date has been set to evaluate the headteacher's performance. All members of staff have had their annual review. Governors make sure the school meets national requirements for safeguarding pupils.
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What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	117434
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	403321

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Primary
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	4–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	154
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Julia Petty
Headteacher	Sara Lawrence
Date of previous school inspection	14 September 2007
Telephone number	01582 623620
Fax number	01582 623621
Email address	admin@stnicholasce.org

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