

St Nicholas CofE (VA) Primary School and Nursery

Six Hills Way, Stevenage, SG2 0PZ

Inspection dates 12–13 December 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Satisfactory	3
	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
Achievement of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Quality of teaching		Requires improvement	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Leadership and management		Requires improvement	3

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement.

- Pupils do not achieve well enough in learning about letters and sounds (phonics) and writing.
- Teachers' expectations of what pupils should achieve vary too much from class to class.
- In phonics sessions, some pupils are working at the levels appropriate to their abilities and what they have already learnt and some are not. As a result, the pace of learning for some pupils is too slow.
- Teachers do not always give pupils sufficient time to write or link the teaching of basic skills well to the teaching of writing.
- Teachers do not always take account of the range of ability in the class when deciding what pupils should learn by the end of lessons.
- Examples of good teaching already in the school are not sufficiently shared.
- Leaders do not focus sufficiently on the effect of teaching on pupils' learning and achievement or give precise enough guidance so all staff know how to improve.

The school has the following strengths

- Leaders, including governors, link training given to staff well to the school's priorities. As a result, teaching is improving and achievement rising.
- Children get off to a good start and achieve well in the Nursery and Reception classes.
- Behaviour is good and pupils say they feel safe. Those from different backgrounds get on well together.
- Pupils are well cared for. Staff make sure they promote pupils' well-being and personal development.
- The school has good partnerships with other institutions and groups.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 14 lessons, of which three were joint observations with the headteacher. Inspectors also observed some teaching of groups of pupils. In all, 15 members of staff were seen teaching.
- Meetings were held with groups of pupils, members of the governing body, school leaders, staff and a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors spoke to pupils during lessons about their work, looked at their books and listened to them read.
- Inspectors took account of the 28 responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View, and spoke to parents at the start of the school day.
- Inspectors analysed responses from 21 questionnaires completed by school staff.
- Inspectors observed the school's work, looked at progress and attendance information, improvement plans, evidence of the monitoring of teaching, and documents relating to safeguarding.

Inspection team

Vivienne McTiffen, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Rosemarie McCarthy

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The school is smaller than the average-sized primary school.
- The majority of pupils are White British. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups is well-above average as is the proportion of those who speak English as an additional language.
- The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals and for whom the school receives additional support, known as the pupil premium, is average.
- The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs supported through school action is above average. The proportion supported at school action plus or with a statement of educational needs is average.
- The school provides a breakfast club that is managed by the governing body.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils attainment and progress in English and mathematics by the end of Year 6.
- Since the previous inspection, the school has experienced staff changes.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching to be consistently good or better by:
 - making sure that all teachers have high expectations of what pupils should achieve so all pupils reach their full potential as learners
 - matching the learning priorities that pupils work towards in lessons more closely to the range of ability in the class.
- Raise pupils' achievement in phonics and writing by:
 - ensuring that pupils are working at levels appropriate to their abilities and what they have already learnt
 - linking the teaching of spelling, punctuation and grammar more closely to the teaching of writing
 - giving pupils enough time to complete written tasks in lessons.
- Improve leadership and management by:
 - making sure that leaders focus on the learning of all pupils when they check the quality of teaching
 - providing clear guidance and precise targets for all staff so they know how to improve their work
 - making more use of examples of good teaching already in the school to help staff to develop their skills.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils requires improvement

- Achievement requires improvement because not enough pupils make good progress from their starting points. Preliminary results for 2013 indicate that pupils reached average standards in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of Year 6. However, the progress of all groups of pupils, including the more able and those from minority ethnic groups, varies too much from class to class. While nearly all make the progress expected nationally, not enough make the more rapid progress needed to reach their full potential as learners.
- In the 2013 national screening check of pupils' knowledge of phonics, pupils in Year 1 did not achieve the national average standard. Pupils do not make quick enough progress in phonics because they do not always work at a level matched precisely to their ability. Sometimes the groups they work in are too large for them to have the attention they need and best use is not made of all staff.
- In 2013, the Year 6 preliminary test results show that pupils' achievement in writing lagged behind reading and mathematics. Not enough pupils in Key Stage 2 made the progress expected nationally in writing. The school's information and work in books show that efforts to improve writing are having a positive impact and pupils' progress is speeding up.
- After a period of underachievement, pupils in the current Year 6 are regaining lost ground. During the inspection, they discussed plots and characters very well before producing well-written, descriptive accounts. For example, a pupil wrote, 'Devoured by the storm, I felt my crewmates' souls calling for their freedom.'
- Pupils' progress in reading accelerates in Year 2 and they read widely. Boys' progress is speeding up because the school provides sufficient titles to motivate them to read. In mathematics, investigation work leads to pupils using their skills widely and more-able pupils achieve the higher National Curriculum levels at the end of Key Stage 2.
- When children start in the Nursery and Reception classes, their abilities are broadly in line with those expected for their age. They achieve well to reach above age-related levels, so they are well prepared for their learning in Year 1. By the end of Year 2, attainment in reading, writing and mathematics is above average.
- Disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs make progress in line with their classmates. Some make good gains towards their personal goals because of the extra help they receive. Staff diligently prepare individuals for the move to secondary education.
- Pupils who join the school with little or no English make steady gains in their language development because staff have benefited from training in helping pupils to acquire English language skills.
- In 2013, the attainment of Year 6 pupils eligible for support from the pupil premium was lower than that of their classmates in reading and mathematics but higher in writing, showing an improvement from 2012. However, they remain more than a term behind in reading and over a year behind in mathematics.

The quality of teaching requires improvement

- The quality of teaching requires improvement because it is not consistently good enough for all pupils to achieve well. There is some variation between classes in how much teachers expect of pupils and what they should achieve.
- Teachers do not make a strong enough link between the teaching of grammar, punctuation and spelling and pupils' regular use of these skills to develop well-structured writing. In some instances, even though pupils are keen to get on, they are not given sufficient time to write.
- When teaching phonics, not all pupils are working at the right ability level. As a result, pupils do not always make the best possible progress in their learning.
- In some lessons, there is not a close enough match between the learning priorities pupils work towards and what pupils, including the more-able pupils, already know. As a result, some pupils do not learn enough by the end of lessons. However, during the inspection, good teaching in a mathematics lesson enabled pupils of all abilities to make good progress.
- In the lessons where teaching is most effective, teachers have high expectations. They expect pupils to work together and they build effectively upon positive attitudes to learning. They move learning along at a good pace and make sure that pupils know how long they have to complete tasks.
- Teachers give guidance on the choice of reading books to widen pupils' experiences. They encourage pupils to talk about their work and formulate ideas before they write. They make interesting links between subjects so pupils write and use computers for a range of purposes.
- Marking has improved since the previous inspection. Teachers indicate how pupils can improve and involve them in judging for themselves how well they are doing. Teachers check pupils' understanding skilfully and correct any misconceptions. They celebrate pupils' successes and reward their efforts.
- In the Nursery and Reception classes, good teaching leads to children's good progress in literacy and mathematics. Staff create a balance between tasks that are led by adults and those that encourage children to make their own choices and develop independence as learners.
- Teaching assistants work well with pupils of differing abilities, including disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs. They nurture good relationships and help pupils to become confident learners. They work well with those needing extra help, aiming to close the gap for those doing less well in mathematics.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- Behaviour is good and consistently well managed. Pupils know the school's rules and quickly help each other if any problems arise. They maintain the same consistently good behaviour with all adults, including during the well-run breakfast club, which provides a sociable start to the school day.
- Children's time in the Early Years Foundation Stage lays firm foundations for their future positive attitudes and keenness to learn. They quickly conform to daily routines and take on small jobs. They respond well to staff and settle to their learning happily.

- Pupils take pride in what they do and present their work neatly. They recognise how learning in one subject links to learning in another. They speak seriously about their topic work and say they appreciate having time to complete projects. Pupils say they enjoy being creative in art and music.
- Although there is some inconsistency in how well teachers make the most of pupils' keenness to learn, when teachers aim high, pupils excel and show exemplary attitudes. For example, during a design and technology lesson, pupils showed perseverance and cooperation. They moved their own learning forward, planning and evaluating their work and using a range of skills to produce moving, wheeled vehicles.
- Pupils accept responsibility and contribute to the school's smooth running in their roles as prefects and school councillors. Those from different backgrounds get on well together. As one pupil commented, 'Everyone is kind and caring.'
- Pupils say they feel well cared for by staff, who are committed to ensuring the well-being of all pupils. There are good arrangements for helping those pupils whose circumstances may make them vulnerable, leading to raised self-esteem and confidence.
- Pupils say they feel safe, a view strongly supported by parents. Pupils recognise different forms of bullying. The school's logs show that incidents are rare but any that do occur are fully recorded and followed up. 'Anti-bullying' weeks raise pupils' awareness and help them to deal with any issues that may arise.
- Attendance is above average. Few pupils are persistently late or stay away from school for long periods of time. Pupils say they are happy to come to school, a view supported by parents. Pupils talk enthusiastically about their favourite activities and say they like being rewarded for their achievements.

The leadership and management requires improvement

- The leadership and management require improvement because, although pupils' achievement is rising and teaching improving, these are not yet good. Leaders do not make enough use of the examples of good teaching in the school to help staff to develop their skills.
- When leaders check the quality of teaching, insufficient attention is paid to the impact of teaching on learning and pupils' progress. The guidance leaders give and targets they set are not precise enough for all staff to be absolutely clear about how well they are doing and how to improve their work.
- The headteacher and the senior leadership team have united staff in common aims after a time of staff changes. Since the previous inspection, the role of subject leaders has strengthened. They receive suitable training to develop their expertise and they provide support for other members of staff.
- Leaders check the progress of every pupil and identify those in danger of falling behind. They are committed to equality of opportunity, and discrimination of any kind is not tolerated.
- The leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage are good. Leaders establish good arrangements for children starting school and maintaining links with parents.

Staff check regularly how well children are doing and collect samples of children's work in well-kept 'Learning Journals' so they can clearly see the progress children make.

- Pupil premium spending on resources and staffing is matched to best suit the needs of individuals, improving pupils' well-being and achievement. Although it is too early to see the impact of the use of additional sports funding, the school is extending existing links to increase physical education activities for pupils.
- Effective local authority support has moved teaching forward in the Early Years Foundation Stage and raised children's achievement. Training for staff to adopt a consistent approach to the teaching of writing matches the needs of the school well. Strong links with other schools develop staff expertise and prepare pupils for the next stage of their education.
- Leaders make sure the school provides a range of subjects, enhanced by trips and visitors which widen pupils' experiences. The school uses partnerships well, including with the church and local business, to provide facilities which it alone could not, with positive effect on pupils' sports, music and academic skills.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governors keep a check on how well the school is doing and what it needs to do to improve. They have recently visited the school to check how well pupils are achieving in writing. Governors use the expertise in their ranks well and attend local authority training to develop the skills they need to carry out their responsibilities. They have the expertise to challenge leaders and hold them to account for the school's performance. Governors use funding effectively. Recent decisions made about spending on technology resources indicate a clear focus on raising pupils' achievement. Governors check whether the pupil premium spending is accelerating pupils' progress. They know how good teaching relates to good achievement and link teachers' pay to success in ensuring pupils achieve well. They monitor the performance of the headteacher and make decisions about staff training. Governors maintain links with parents and collect their views regularly. They weigh up very carefully any decisions they may make as a result of feedback from parents. The governing body carries out its duties effectively and makes sure that safeguarding procedures are robust and statutory requirements are met.

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	117456
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	425261

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	3–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	219
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Keith Hopkinson
Headteacher	Jackie Roberts
Date of previous school inspection	31 January 2012
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