

St Nicholas Church of England VA Primary School

Six Hills Way, Stevenage, Hertfordshire, SG2 0PZ

Inspection dates	24–25 May 2016
Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Good
Early years provision	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- Pupils in all year groups are making good progress as a result of improved teaching.
- The headteacher’s vision and determination to drive improvement has been a significant factor in the school’s progress since the last inspection.
- Teachers and teaching assistants work well together to support pupils and promote their personal development.
- Pupils enjoy coming to school and say that they feel safe and well looked after.
- Behaviour around the school and in lessons is good.
- The gaps in achievement between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils have closed and there is now very little difference between how well these groups do.
- The school’s revised assessment system accurately tracks the progress that individual pupils and groups make.
- Children learn well in the early years. They are enthusiastic about their time in school and make rapid progress.
- Governors have a clear understanding of what the school does well and where it needs to improve further.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Recent improvements mean that although teaching is good, not enough is currently leading to outstanding progress.
- The most able pupils are not challenged sufficiently in all classes during mathematics lessons.
- The impact of the leadership of individual subjects is variable. Inconsistencies exist in the quality of learning across the full range of national curriculum subjects taught in some classes.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve subject leadership so that learning in all areas of the national curriculum matches the good practice that currently exists across the school.
- Ensure that teachers in all classes routinely provide the most able pupils with sufficiently challenging work in mathematics.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- The headteacher has successfully driven forward improvements on several fronts since her appointment in January 2015. Her commitment, vision and resourcefulness have created a very positive learning culture within the school. Parents, pupils and staff speak highly of the impact that she has had on the school in a short period of time.
- Systems to monitor the school's work are effective. A planned series of monitoring checks has supported the improvements in teaching. On arrival, the headteacher determined to understand precisely where the strengths were in the teaching staff, and was equally determined to identify where teaching needed to improve. As a result, leaders' self-evaluation is accurate.
- Professional development opportunities for teaching staff are tailored to make sure that specific aspects of a teachers' work are supported. The improvement culture that has grown within the staff is such that, as one teacher told inspectors, 'I have no worries about approaching the headteacher and asking for some support if I feel that I could improve in a particular subject or area'.
- The headteacher is well supported by an increasingly effective team of senior and middle leaders. More responsibility has been given to this group of late and this is helping the school's capacity for further improvement to grow. The school has a very clear plan to enable it to deliver the national curriculum. The leadership of key subjects, such as English and science, is strong and has been the focus of much work. The impact of this work can be seen in the improvements to pupils' learning in these subjects.
- The quality of subject leadership varies. While there is good practice, some subject leaders have not been given sufficient time to develop detailed improvement plans. This is because the school has rightly elected to focus its energies on providing a good quality of education and ensuring that pupils' essential skills in reading, writing and mathematics are secure. The school now needs to address the variation in outcomes between different subjects and between different classes, especially geography, art and design and technology.
- Extra-curricular activities, chiefly focused on sports at present, have increased in the last year. Pupils are keen to participate and there is an impressive range of opportunities for pupils to represent their school in sports. Additional funding for physical education and sports is both well spent and well monitored. Participation rates have increased this year and pupils are motivated by the clubs and sports that are on offer.
- The additional funding for disadvantaged pupils (the pupil premium) is allocated effectively to provide good value for money and its impact is audited very carefully. The improved outcomes for this group testify to the effectiveness of the school's work in this important area.
- The school's values support and promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development very well. The school is a harmonious community, with pupils and families drawn from a wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Pupils learn not just to be tolerant of different cultures, but to embrace and celebrate them. They are averse to injustice and speak openly about looking after people who are vulnerable.
- The leadership of special educational needs and disability is effective. This group of pupils receive support that is carefully monitored, and staff delivering these interventions are appropriately trained.
- Communication with parents and families is good. Parents are kept informed about pupils' progress through termly parent consultations and also teacher forums. The school's website is up to date and is an effective hub of information and news. The parents that responded to the online questionnaire about the school were overwhelmingly positive; of the 126 responses, 92% of parents would recommend the school and 98% said that their child is happy at school.
- **The governance of the school**
 - The governing body has restructured since the previous inspection to become more effective.
 - Governors have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and where it needs to improve further.
 - Governors work in conjunction with leaders to provide both challenge and support.
 - Governors take firm action to ensure that safeguarding and health and safety requirements are met.
 - Governors ensure that performance related pay systems are in place to hold teachers and leaders to account for the impact of their work.

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. The school's systems and procedures meet requirements. Staff training for child protection and first aid is up to date. The school's processes for checking the suitability of new staff are effective. The most vulnerable pupils, including those who are involved with outside agencies, including social care and medical care, are well known to staff.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good

- Teaching has improved since the last inspection. Teachers now plan lessons that are informed by an assessment of what pupils have previously learned. Some teachers have also become very effective at assessing progress during lessons and moving pupils' learning on if they have grasped a concept, or slowing down the pace of learning if they are struggling.
- The most effective teaching is in English and mathematics; in these subjects teachers provide pupils with very clear objectives and check on learning frequently. Learning is apparent in books as, in all year groups, pupils are making good progress over a period of time. Evidence from some books shows that pupils are making particularly rapid progress over a short period of time when their teacher has very precisely identified what it is they need to do in order to move on.
- Teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve have risen since the arrival of the new headteacher. Many teachers communicate these high expectations very clearly, setting out precisely what pupils are expected to learn. Pupils are receptive to this clarity, telling inspectors that it helps them to set targets for themselves within a lesson.
- Teaching promotes pupils' own understanding of how well they are doing. Teachers provide clear guidance and feedback which pupils value and frequently respond to.
- Teaching in subjects other than English and mathematics is variable. The amount of work that pupils do in, for example, geography is inconsistent; in some classes, geography topics are covered well while in others too little work exists.
- A new assessment system is in place to measure progress in the revised national curriculum. Teachers' assessments are consistent and accurately track pupils as they develop new skills and learning. The school's assessments have been moderated by external sources. They support the school's view that the picture the information is painting about achievement is accurate.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils' attitudes to their learning are good. In some classes they are exceptionally positive but this is not consistent as, in other classes the pace of learning dips when teachers are not managing it closely.
- Pupils told inspectors that they enjoy coming to school and that their lessons are interesting. One of their wishes for an even better school would be, 'a bigger library because we enjoy reading so much'.
- Older pupils value the opportunity to take on responsibilities. Year 6 pupils act as prefects and help out around the school during break, lunch and assembly times. Year 5 pupils are currently being prepared for these roles next year. The older pupils in the after-school club similarly volunteer their help, and support staff by helping to set tables and distribute snacks.
- Pupils are aware of, and value, the school's Christian values. Contributions to assemblies are thoughtful, and pupils can explain how they can help out their fellow pupils.
- Pupils access a range of after-school activities with enthusiasm. Sporting clubs and teams are popular, and a sports apprentice also organises activities during lunchtime to keep pupils active. The number of sports that pupils can play is broad and varied.
- The school council is active in school improvement. Pupils contribute their thoughts through their elected councillors using the virtual learning platform, a part of the school's well-organised website, which pupils confidently use as a forum for their ideas and contributions.

- Pupils feel safe in school and have a clear understanding of who to turn to if they are in need of help. Their understanding of staying safe when using social media is very well supported through the school's blogs, which provide secure areas where pupils can gain important skills in using social media in a controlled and monitored environment.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- In lessons, on the playground and around the school, pupils conduct themselves well. Relationships between pupils and staff are positive and this helps to ensure that lessons are calm and start promptly.
- Pupils listen carefully to teachers and are keen to respond and answer questions where they can.
- Rates of disruption are low and, on the rare occasions that this does happen, pupils are confident that teachers deal with it quickly and effectively.
- Pupils report that bullying is extremely rare, and many say that it simply does not happen in this school. They understand that bullying is something to be aware of, and say that they know what to do if they or their friends were to be bullied.
- Pupils are very positive ambassadors for their school. They enjoy attending school and are proud to be part of the school community. They look after their school site.
- The school has worked hard to improve attendance, and this has been successful. Pupils' rates of attendance are higher than the national average for primary schools. The rates of persistent absence are low.

Outcomes for pupils

are good

- Pupils are making good progress in reading, writing and mathematics across the school. Evidence in pupils' books supports the school's assessment data which shows that the great majority of pupils are working at age-related expectations in these subjects.
- The proportion of pupils in Year 1 who are on track to meet the required standard in the phonics screening check is high. This has been the case for last two years. Effective teaching and close monitoring of pupils' progress means that pupils are gaining important skills in reading at an early age. Some pupils in Year 1 have moved on very quickly, and are now learning more complex skills of sentence construction.
- The quality of some of the written work of Year 2 pupils is high. They are learning to write neatly and take pride in their work. There is clear progress in the quality of pupils' handwriting over time.
- In 2015, pupils in Year 6 left the school with standards in reading, writing and mathematics that were broadly in line with national averages. The school's assessment information indicates that higher proportions of pupils are currently working at age-related expectations than was the case at this time last year. The work seen in pupils' books is of a good standard in Year 6. The most able pupils in this year group received challenging work on a regular basis. These pupils say that they relish the opportunity to solve difficult problems.
- The gaps in achievement between disadvantaged pupils in Year 6 and others were too wide in 2015. Interventions were not monitored closely enough and their effectiveness had not been measured. All interventions were stopped in the spring term of 2015 and a review of their effectiveness was undertaken. The support and interventions that are now in place to support disadvantaged pupils are tracked carefully and are known to be successful. There are small numbers of disadvantaged pupils in each year group but the school's assessment data and a scrutiny of pupils' work shows that gaps have either closed completely or are very narrow. In Years 1 and 5, for example, disadvantaged pupils are doing slightly better than other pupils in reading, writing and mathematics. In Year 6, disadvantaged pupils have virtually closed the gaps and are making very strong progress.
- The progress that pupils who have special educational needs or disability make is good. The interventions and support that they receive are also monitored very carefully. Pupils are known as individuals and their support is tailored to their needs. Parents expressed their support for the way that the school helps and encourages this group of pupils.
- The school has worked successfully to promote a good standard of handwriting. Inspectors looked at pupils' work across all age ranges and were impressed by the quality of pupils' presentation; pride and care are apparent in the overwhelming majority of pupils' books. Handwriting is clear, legible and joined-up.

- Pupils make variable progress in the overall range of subjects. In science, pupils investigate regularly and are challenged to think about their work. The quality of pupils' work in this subject is frequently high; pupils report that they like science and several want the school to build a laboratory so that they can study in more depth. In other subjects, including geography, art, and design and technology, the quality of learning is much more variable between classes. There is evidence of some good work in all of these subjects but the school does not have a full overview and the overall picture is too patchy. An example of this can be seen in pupils' sketchbooks which indicate that skills and techniques are not being sufficiently developed over time.
- Pupils have only begun to learn a modern foreign language (French) since September 2015. As a result, all pupils in Key Stage 2 are learning at a similar level. Year 6 pupils' learning in this subject has moved on quickly this year.
- Pupils are well prepared for secondary school. Their skills and knowledge in reading, writing and mathematics are at least in line with age-related expectations and they have very positive attitudes to their learning.

Early years provision

is good

- Children join the early years with a broad range of skills and knowledge. A significant proportion enter with levels below those typical of their age. They make good progress in the Nursery and in the Reception class, and the proportion that leave the early years with a good level of development has been above the national level for the past two years. This positive trend is set to continue for the children currently in Reception.
- Children are taught effectively by a team of teachers and teaching assistants. Planning is informed by careful and frequent assessment, and individual children are known well by staff.
- The environment is bright and welcoming, and staff have coped well with recent building work which reduced their outdoor learning area. To compensate, the wooded area within the school's boundaries has been used to provide children with an outdoor learning environment. This has quickly become an important element of the children's learning and is exceptionally well used.
- In a beautiful setting among mature beech trees, children are able to use a natural environment as an extension of their classroom. Here, they learn from a wide range of activities. A log circle, for example, provides a place for discussions, stories and questioning to occur. During the inspection, children looked for insects, using guides to name the ones that they found and expanding their vocabulary as they described them. One child, on creating an insect from modelling clay and twigs, spoke about finding 'antenna-shaped pieces of wood' to make his model more realistic. Teachers skilfully create good learning opportunities in this area that children enthusiastically engage in.
- The teaching of early writing has improved. This has been an aspect of learning which has kept pace with national levels while other areas have exceeded them. A renewed focus, with a range of activities linked to reading, and good use of computer software, have supported the increased levels of progress that children are making.
- The early years leader has made a good start to ensuring that children thrive in this part of the school. Parents are very positive about their child's experiences, and comment that they feel well informed and able to contribute to assessment. These good relationships between home and school help children to make the transition to school more easily.
- At the end of the early years, children are provided with a comprehensive transition programme into Year 1. As a result, when September comes the children are already familiar with the new arrangements and learning time is not lost as children adjust.

School details

Unique reference number	117456
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	10001906

This inspection 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	207
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Lizzie Jeanes
Headteacher	Sarah Stevens
Telephone number	01438 352706
Website	www.stnicholas120.herts.sch.uk
Email address	admin@stnicholas120.herts.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	12 December 2013

Information about this school

- The school is smaller than the average-sized primary school.
- An above-average proportion of pupils are from minority ethnic groups, and many do not speak English as their first language.
- The proportion of pupils supported through the pupil premium grant is below average. The pupil premium is additional government funding for pupils known to be eligible for free school meals and children looked after.
- The proportion of pupils with special educational needs or disability is below average.
- The school's website meets requirements with regard to the information that it provides.
- The school met the current government floor targets in 2015. These express the minimum expectations for what pupils should achieve by the end of their time in the school.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed pupils learning in lessons and visited smaller groups of pupils in additional sessions. In all lessons, they looked at pupils' books in order to evaluate the quality of learning over time.
- Inspectors carried out a scrutiny of pupils' work for all subjects in the national curriculum.
- Inspectors met with pupils formally and informally.
- Inspectors met with the six governors, and spoke with the chair of the governing body on the telephone. There were also meetings with a representative from the local authority and a telephone conversation with a representative of the diocese.
- Inspectors considered the 126 responses to the online Ofsted questionnaire, Parent View. Inspectors also spoke with parents at the start of the school day.
- Inspectors also took account of 100 pupil questionnaire responses and 27 staff questionnaire responses.
- Inspectors reviewed records provided by the school, including information about pupils' progress, minutes of meetings of the governing body, and documents relating to behaviour, attendance and safeguarding.

Inspection team

Chris Moodie, lead inspector

Patricia McLachlan

Her Majesty's Inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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