



**Office for Standards  
in Education**

**Inspection report**  
**St John's CE School**

**Essex Education Authority**

Dates of inspection: 29-30 June 2004

This inspection was carried out under section 3 of the School Inspections Act 1996 and was deemed a section 10 inspection under the same Act

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## **Basic information about the school**

Name of school:	St John's CE School
Type of school:	Secondary
Status:	Voluntary Controlled
Age range of pupils:	11 to 16 years
Headteacher:	Mr K Sharp
Address of school:	Tower Road Epping Essex CM16 5EN
Telephone:	01992 573028
Name and address of appropriate authority:	The governing body, address as above
Chair of governors:	Mr M Riclesford
Local education authority area:	Essex
Unique reference number:	115236
Name of reporting inspector:	Mr H Parr HMI
Dates of inspection:	29-30 June 2004

## Introduction

1. St John's CE School is situated in Epping. It is a mixed comprehensive school of average size, with 860 pupils on roll. Thirteen per cent of the pupils are entitled to free school meals, sixteen per cent have been designated by the school as having special educational needs and almost two per cent have a statement of such need. These figures are broadly average. Almost all of the pupils are of white British heritage and speak English as their mother tongue. The main area which the school serves is neither favoured nor deprived, but many pupils come from outlying districts. The parents have a wide choice of schools; in the last two years, the parents of around four pupils in ten did not make St John's their first preference. The overall attainment of the pupils when they enter the school is slightly below average. The range of attainment is wide; many of the pupils have problems with literacy which affect their work in other subjects.

2. When the school was inspected in October and November 2001 as part of the national programme of inspections it was judged to be underachieving. Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI) visited the school in February 2003 and found that too little progress had been made. The school was made subject to special measures because it was failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education.

3. The governors drew up an action plan to address the key issues from the inspection of February 2003. The school was visited by HMI on three occasions to monitor the progress being made.

4. In June 2004 two HMI inspected the school, assessing the standard of education provided and the progress the school has made, in particular in relation to the main findings and key issues in the inspection report of February 2003.

## Main findings

5. In accordance with section 14 of the School Inspections Act 1996, I am of the opinion that the school no longer requires special measures, since it is now providing an acceptable standard of education for its pupils. The main findings of the inspection are:

- standards are rising. Overall attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 is in line with the national expectation in English, mathematics and science. Achievement is much better in both key stages than at the time of the last inspection because the teaching is more consistent. Standards at Key Stage 4 are improving, but are still below average overall because of the legacy of indifferent teaching in the past;
  - most pupils make the progress expected of them because the quality of teaching and learning is almost always at least satisfactory, and frequently it is good or very good. This represents a significant improvement since the last inspection, when progress was unsatisfactory in a third of lessons;
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- the pupils' attitudes to learning are generally positive. They appreciate the school's efforts to improve the quality of provision, and they respond well to the better teaching. Most pupils behave well in lessons and around the school;
- the school has made determined efforts to improve attendance, but the overall rate remains unsatisfactory. Erratic attendance continues to affect the attainment of some pupils. Most are punctual to school and to lessons;
- the pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is sound and provision is satisfactory;
- the key factor in the school's progress is the improvement in the quality of teaching. The school's vigorous efforts have achieved a consistency which is beginning to eliminate uneven progress. The pupils' progress in lessons was unsatisfactory only on the rare occasions when pace and challenge were not maintained;
- curricular provision has improved. The previously limited range of opportunities in Key Stage 4 has been extended to include vocational options which provide a more relevant choice for many pupils. New equipment in classrooms and more varied and active methods of teaching have improved the day-to-day experience of the pupils;
- assessment is good. The school has collected valuable data on the pupils' attainment and uses it well to check their progress and to take corrective action where necessary. Recent training has improved the everyday use of assessment information in the classroom. Marking is regular, but varies in its helpfulness;
- the headteacher provides good leadership. He has set a clear direction for the school and taken successful steps to improve the quality of teaching and management. Senior and middle managers have an accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses, together with clear priorities and efficient procedures. The school's capacity to improve further has been much increased;
- managers at all levels monitor the work of the school carefully to ensure that policies are properly implemented. The evaluation of the success of these policies is increasingly based on defined and measurable criteria. The draft improvement plan for next year draws on an accurate analysis of the school's current position;
- the governors support the school well. Through closer and more regular involvement they have increased their ability to probe and to challenge;
- support from the local education authority (LEA) has been satisfactory overall, and particularly effective in helping to resolve budgetary and staffing difficulties.

## Key issues

6. In order to improve the pupils' quality of education further, the governors, headteacher, senior managers and staff should continue to:

- raise standards;
- improve attendance;
- improve the quality of teaching.

## Inspection findings

### Standards achieved by the pupils

7. Standards have risen since the last inspection. Overall attainment on entry to the school is slightly below average because of the significant minority of pupils who have difficulties with literacy. Most pupils make at least satisfactory, and often good, progress in Key Stage 3, so that, by age 14, overall standards are in line with the national expectation. Attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 is rising, but remains below average because of the legacy of indifferent teaching in the past.

8. Results in the national tests at Key Stage 3 in 2003 were an improvement on the previous year but still below national figures. The provisional results of the national tests for 2004, together with the work seen in lessons, confirm a further improvement in English and mathematics. Results in science are similar to those of 2003. In English, the proportion of the pupils achieving the expected Level 5 or above rose to 76 per cent, from 64 per cent in the previous year. In mathematics, almost half of the pupils achieved Level 6 or above, with one in six reaching the well-above-average Levels 7 and 8. The overall trend of improvement at Key Stage 3 is above the national trend.

9. The GCSE results in 2003 were well below national figures and those of similar schools. The school's projections for 2004 are that around the same percentage of pupils will achieve five or more grades A\* to C as in 2003, but that the proportions achieving five or more, or one or more, A\* to G grades will increase significantly. The school believes that it will meet its targets because of the improvements it has made in teaching, learning and attitudes and the focused action it has taken, for example, in ensuring that the pupils complete coursework. Overall standards in lessons in Key Stage 4 were broadly average, indicating an improvement since the inspection in 2003. Most pupils were making at least the progress expected of them, and the progress of some was good.

10. Standards in English are rising. They are average overall at Key Stage 3, but remain below average at Key Stage 4. A significant minority of the pupils enter the school with low levels of literacy, and this has a detrimental effect on their attainment in English and in other subjects. The technical accuracy of the pupils' writing in middle and lower-attaining groups is inconsistent. There are fewer inaccuracies in the work of girls than of boys, some of whom take insufficient pride in their writing. However, by Year 9, the majority of the pupils are attaining the nationally expected standards. In higher-attaining groups, the pupils write at length, in a lively and engaging style, and are developing a good range of vocabulary. They

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understand how language can be used for different purposes, and how to use effects in their persuasive writing. The standards attained by Year 10 pupils in an upper set were above those expected for their age. They wrote imaginative and sensitive poems on the theme of racism, showing a full awareness of moral and cultural dilemmas.

11. In mathematics in both key stages, many pupils attain standards that are above or well above those expected for their age. In the Key Stage 3 lessons and in the written work sampled, standards were regularly above average. In Year 7, the pupils used and substituted algebraic formulae, applying their skills well to practical problems. In Year 8, they formed and tested hypotheses and evaluated evidence designed to prove them. In Year 10, the pupils successfully completed sample space diagrams and used them to calculate probabilities. Through regular practice, the pupils in both key stages have developed confidence in applying the mathematics they know to solve problems. The higher attainers chose and justified their methods of calculation.

12. Standards in lessons and in written work were more variable in science because there was greater variation in the level of expectation. Some teachers drew well on the contributions of the pupils, obliging them to recall what they knew and to apply it to the problems in hand. In Key Stage 3, regular opportunities to conduct experiments and investigations had deepened the understanding and increased the commitment of the pupils in a Year 8 class. They displayed their different levels of understanding by summing up individually what they had learned. In a Year 10 lesson, the pupils were interested in the content but were required to listen rather than contribute actively. Boys were less tolerant of this approach, and this affected their level of engagement and the standards they achieved.

13. The pupils who have special educational needs made generally sound progress in lessons. Recent, focused work has improved the standards of those pupils in Year 7 whose attainment was low on entry to the school. The register of special educational needs is becoming more manageable because better teaching ensures that fewer pupils underachieve as a result of poor behaviour.

### **The pupils' attitudes, values and personal development**

14. The pupils' attitudes and behaviour have improved steadily. They were good or very good in six out of ten lessons and at least satisfactory in all but two. Most pupils were keen to do well; many worked hard and wanted to know how to improve their work or get higher grades, especially when the teaching pushed them to achieve more. They were quiet and attentive in lessons, even when the teaching was lacklustre. In a handful of classes they were slow to settle down, especially when they had a written task to complete, and asked for the teacher's help before they had tried for themselves. The pupils behaved well in lessons, in assembly and around the site. There were occasional incidences of jostling and boisterousness on corridors and narrow staircases, but most pupils moved sensibly and promptly to lessons.

15. The level of fixed-term exclusions has fallen for the second year running and there have been no permanent exclusions. There are far fewer occasions than two years ago when teachers call on the help of senior staff to deal with poor behaviour. However, the imbalance between rewards and sanctions is often evident in classrooms; the school has recently conducted a timely review of its system for rewarding pupils and for managing their behaviour.

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16. The school has made determined efforts to improve attendance, but, at 90.6 per cent, the overall rate remains unsatisfactory. The level of unauthorised absence, 1.2 per cent, is above average but has fallen significantly. The school has been without an educational welfare officer for part of this term but has secured a replacement for September, when a new electronic registration system will also be introduced. At present, several of the registers used in lessons are out of date and do not give an accurate picture of the number on roll. Current registration procedures do not sufficiently deter internal truancy. Erratic attendance continues to affect the attainment of some pupils. Most are punctual to school and to lessons. The disruption caused by late arrivals to lessons, frequent at the time of the last inspection, is now rare.

17. The pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is sound. The sometimes apathetic and occasionally abrasive attitudes of two years ago were no longer apparent. The pupils are more willing to become involved and to support the school. Year 7 pupils, for example, have acted as hosts to show primary-aged pupils around the school. Those in Year 10 have taken on the role of senior students, and supported younger pupils by acting as 'student listeners'. The pupils have played their part in revising classroom rules, and most abide by them. They are helping to design the cover of the new student planner and use it more regularly to record homework and plan their time. Many pupils participate in extracurricular clubs and activities, including visits to the theatre, art galleries, sporting events and concerts. The pupils' spiritual development has been slowed by some indifferent teaching of religious education in the past.

18. The school's provision for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory overall, with some strengths. Moral development is sound. The school's efforts to involve the pupils in decision-making have been rewarded by better behaviour and more positive attitudes. It provides well for social development, and has created a greater sense of community by increasing the number of ways that pupils can be involved beyond lessons. The pupils appreciate the improvements to the school environment and ethos. They commented favourably, for example, on the better teaching, the improved resources, the new seating areas and the water dispensers. Good provision is also made for cultural development, with visits and exchanges in this country and abroad supplemented by work, for example in humanities, art and music, which gives pupils an understanding of other cultures. The school is aware that its promotion of spiritual development lags behind the other areas. The newly established chaplaincy team aims to promote closer links between the school and St John's church and to improve the teaching of religious education. It has also provided support to staff and contributions to assemblies.

### **The quality of education**

19. The quality of teaching has improved significantly. At the last inspection, one lesson in three was unsatisfactory and only one in five was good. On this occasion, nine out of ten lessons were satisfactory or better, and over half were good or very good. The school's vigorous efforts have achieved a consistency which is beginning to eliminate the uneven progress characteristic of previous years. Well-targeted training, rigorous monitoring and, where necessary, decisive action have all contributed to this improved profile. All the teachers know exactly what is expected and most do it well. When progress was less rapid in lessons, it was because some teachers did not maintain the necessary pace throughout the lesson, and the content or activities were not sufficiently challenging to engage the pupils' full attention.

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20. Most of the teaching had significant strengths. Lessons were well planned, with a good structure that encouraged a fast pace of learning. Methods were varied, and more regularly involved practical activities which helped the pupils to apply what they had learned and deepen their understanding, for example, through games and competitive work in groups. Newly installed electronic whiteboards improved the quality and pace of several presentations. Most teachers had high expectations: they exemplified and modelled the standards they wanted, and were vigilant about behaviour and work rate. The pupils contributed readily in the best lessons. The teachers were careful to ensure that everyone kept up by well-focused questioning and the requirement that all demonstrated what they had learned. Some teachers made regular references to the pupils' current level of work and showed them what they needed to do to improve. The obvious enjoyment and enthusiasm of a few teachers were reciprocated by the pupils.

21. In the weaker lessons, the pace of learning dropped. This was sometimes because the pupils were not interested in the content of the lesson. The teacher did not make sure they were doing what they should when they were working in groups or independently. A lack of challenge in what was required contributed to the pupils' indifference: they did not know clearly enough what they were expected to do by when, and what they should have learned by the end of the lesson. They were not made to contribute when the teacher was working with the whole class, and some took the opportunity to chat or rest. On one occasion, the teacher did not prevent some pupils from interrupting the class, and each other, with inconsequential chatter. On another, the slavish completion of a series of worksheets failed to generate much interest, particularly since the pupils knew some of the information already.

22. Assessment is a developing strength. The school has collected valuable data on the pupils' attainment and uses it well to check progress and to intervene where necessary. Information from tests, examinations and teacher assessments has been collated and forms the basis of targets for improvement. The pupils are given a minimum grade to aim for, and a further 'challenge' grade to aspire to. Their progress against these expectations is regularly monitored. The system is new, and its full potential has yet to be realised. Recent training has improved the day-to-day use of assessment by the teachers, but inconsistencies remain. The pupils are usually aware of what their targets are, but, in several subjects, do not know what they have to do to reach them. Marking is completed regularly and conscientiously, but is sometimes not helpful in pointing out to pupils how make their work better.

23. Curricular provision has improved. At Key Stage 3, more conscious and explicit efforts are made to develop literacy across the curriculum, for example by emphasising and using key words. The previously limited offering in Key Stage 4 has been extended to include vocational options which provide a more relevant choice for many pupils. In September, for example, the pupils can choose from four vocational GCSE courses. In addition, the school is offering courses in construction, engineering and motor vehicle maintenance in conjunction with the local college of further education. The pupils have responded with better behaviour and attitudes to the vocational courses currently on offer, and this further expansion is welcome. Provision for the pupils who have special educational needs has improved in recent months, and further development is planned in September when a new co-ordinator arrives.

24. The school is better equipped and more fully resourced, for example, by the introduction of a number of electronic whiteboards. These have contributed to the more varied and active methods of teaching which the pupils now experience in their everyday

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curriculum. Improvements to the school buildings and fabric have been acknowledged by the pupils, who appreciate the increased investment in their education. Developing links with local primary schools are helping to improve the transition from Year 6 to Year 7. The setting of homework remains erratic, but the pupils are recording it more conscientiously in their new planners.

25. The pupils are well cared for and well supported. The school provides good academic and personal guidance. Older pupils have been trained to help younger ones. Substantial, additional support has been provided to pupils, for example, through a range of clubs to help with homework and general progress. A breakfast club was launched in May for pupils arriving early to school. Coursework days, booster and master classes, revision sessions in the holidays and individual mentoring have all contributed to the rise in standards.

26. Vigorous efforts have been made to improve the way the school is perceived by parents. Closer links with home have been forged, for example through the new student planners. The appearance of the school has been improved: entrance doors have been replaced and the reception area for visitors has been refurbished. Plans are in hand to introduce a modified school uniform and a standard kit for physical education in September. News about the school's achievements is regularly disseminated to parents. The school reports that these efforts are improving its image in the community.

### **Leadership and management**

27. The headteacher provides good leadership. He has set a clear direction for the school and taken successful steps to improve the quality of teaching and management. He has been rigorous in challenging unsatisfactory performance and successful in recruiting good teachers to replace those who have left. Strategic planning is based on an accurate assessment of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Procedures to evaluate the success of the school's actions are increasingly based on measurable criteria for assessing their impact on the pupils. The draft improvement plan for next year provides a good basis for continuing work.

28. The deputy and assistant headteachers have clearly defined roles and well-established procedures for checking the work of middle managers; for example, by reviewing their monitoring plans. The leadership of many subject departments is good, and has contributed to improvements in standards, for instance in the core subjects. Subject leaders check the quality of teaching, written work, planning and homework and report to the designated senior manager. The school used additional funding wisely to strengthen its leadership team. New arrivals, improved systems and good training have increased the capacity of the school to improve further.

29. The governors support the school well. They have increased their involvement with the school through regular visiting. The committees have been reorganised so that key players can take a more strategic view of developments. Additional meetings have been arranged to allow senior staff to brief governors on key issues. Useful work has been done in improving the school's links with parents and contributory schools. Governors are better placed to challenge senior managers because of their improved knowledge of the school and how it works.

30. The LEA's support for the school during its time in special measures has been satisfactory overall. The link adviser knows the school well and has responded to emerging requirements. Support with finance and staffing has been good, and crucial to the school's

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success. Transitional funding has been provided to allow the school to recover, over a three-year period, from its current budgetary difficulties. A sensible plan has been arranged to achieve a balanced budget by the academic year 2006-7. Help with resolving staffing issues has enabled the school to strengthen its teaching profile. Good advice has also been provided in managing behaviour. The LEA has, at intervals, conducted broadly accurate reviews of teaching, but has not always responded vigorously enough to the findings. Unsatisfactory teaching persisted in the school for too long and threatened to slow its progress in securing the removal of special measures.

### **Implementation of the action plan**

31. The inspection report of February 2003 required the school to address four key issues. These related to raising standards, improving the quality of teaching and learning, improving attitudes and behaviour, and improving the impact of leadership and management. The school has made good progress on all four key issues.

32. Successful steps have been taken to raise standards of achievement and increase the pupils' rates of progress. These have included ensuring that teaching is of a consistent standard, improving monitoring and assessment and taking steps to give those pupils who needed it additional support. When final results are available for this year's national tests, they are expected to confirm the improved standards apparent in lessons.

33. Decisive action referred to above has improved the quality of teaching significantly. Collaborative work undertaken under the auspices of the Leadership Incentive Grant with the partnership group of Harlow schools has helped to improve assessment and ensure that teaching is more accurately based on the pupils' needs.

34. The pupils' attitudes to learning and their behaviour have improved because the teaching is better and systems are tighter. The actions the school has taken to ensure that pupils are more involved with the life of the school have contributed to an improved ethos. There is more work to do in improving attendance.

35. Leadership and management have improved at all levels. The school now has appropriate measures to gauge the success of its initiatives and to evaluate progress. Evaluations have become progressively sharper and more concise during the school's time in special measures.

## **Appendix – Information about the inspection**

The school was inspected by HMI in February 2003. The inspection was carried out under section 3 of the School Inspections Act 1996, which gives Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools the authority to cause any school to be inspected. The inspection was also deemed a section 10 inspection under the same Act. The inspection was critical of many aspects of the work of the school and, in accordance with that Act, the school was made subject to special measures because it was failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education.

The school was visited by HMI in July and December 2003, and in March 2004 to assess the progress it was making to implement its action plan and address the key issues in the inspection report of February 2003.

In June 2004, two HMI returned to inspect the school for two days. The inspection was carried out under section 3 of the School Inspections Act 1996.

Twenty five lessons or parts of lessons, one assembly and three registration sessions were inspected. The pupils were observed at break and lunch times and samples of their work were inspected. Meetings were held with the headteacher, senior staff, the chair of governors and a representative from the LEA. Informal discussions were held with other staff and pupils. A wide range of the school's documentation was scrutinised. Account was also taken of the evidence from previous monitoring inspections.

The inspection assessed the quality of education provided and the progress the school has made, in particular in relation to the main findings and key issues in the inspection report of February 2003 and the action plan prepared by the governing body to address those key issues.