

Birchley St Mary's Catholic Primary School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	104813
Local Authority	St Helens
Inspection number	308677
Inspection date	17 June 2008
Reporting inspector	Eileen Mulgrew HMI

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 on roll	
School	211
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Fr Bernard Jackson
Headteacher	Mrs Claire Cropper
Date of previous school inspection	15 March 2004
School address	Birchley Road Billinge Wigan Lancashire WN5 7QJ
Telephone number	1744 678610
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Age group	4-11
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The inspector evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: the achievement of pupils; the quality of pupils' personal development and well-being; and the leadership and management of the school. Evidence was gathered from the school's self-evaluation, plans for further improvement, nationally published assessment data and the school's own records of progress over time. Discussions were held with staff, pupils, governors and the local authority representative. Questionnaires returned by the parents were considered. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but the inspector found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

St Mary's is a slightly smaller than average school with the vast majority of pupils from White British heritage. There are no pupils at an early stage of learning to speak English. The percentage of pupils eligible for a free school meal is low and children attend from a wide socio-economic range. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those with a statement of special educational need, is much lower than the national average. The school has received Artsmark Gold, Healthy Schools Award, Activemark, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Award and Basic Skills Quality Mark.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

St Mary's provides an outstanding quality of education. There is a true sense of a family of St Mary's based on the distinctive Catholic culture which spreads through all areas of school life. The school enjoys an excellent reputation within the community. The school is popular with parents, many of whom attended themselves, and is frequently oversubscribed. Comments such as 'Birchley St Mary's is an excellent school with excellent staff' and 'My children are thriving at this school and we are very proud of St Mary's' reflect the overwhelming pride parents and pupils feel to be associated with this school. St Mary's provides excellent value for money and has excellent capacity to improve further.

Standards reached by pupils by the time they leave school in Year 6 are very high and the progress that they make is excellent. The school has maintained this level of success for the past five years. Most pupils enter Key Stage 1 working securely at the levels expected for their age. Pupils' progress, including that of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, accelerates as they move through the school with pupils consistently reaching overall above average standards at the end of Key Stage 1 and well above average standards in English, mathematics and science at the end of Key Stage 2. In the 2007 national tests for Year 6, all pupils gained the expected levels in English, mathematics and science. Furthermore, well above average numbers of pupils reached higher than expected levels in all subjects. However, the school continually strives to improve and identified an opportunity to raise standards in writing even further; inspection evidence shows an increase in the numbers of pupils reaching higher than expected levels in Year 2 in this subject. School data shows that results in Year 6 may not be quite as high as usual this year but the school knows the reasons for this and is confident the results will rise again in 2009.

The quality of teaching and learning is outstanding. The staff are dedicated to doing the very best they can for all pupils and invest much time in attending further training to improve their own expertise. Teachers are enthusiastic and have high expectations of themselves and their pupils. They know their pupils as individuals and provide learning activities that are of interest to them and challenge them to think. For example, in an English lesson, pupils were challenged to create their own 'portmanteau' words after studying 'The Jabberwocky' poem. Excellent relationships at all levels are based on respect for each other. Pupils respond by showing excellent attitudes and behaviour, and enjoyment of their learning. Consequently, pupils learn well and achieve very high standards in their work. Pupils' work is marked thoroughly and teachers' comments praise the effort of pupils. The information generated from checking on pupils' progress leads to targets set for some, mainly older, pupils and is not used consistently throughout the school. As a result, pupils are not always clear about what they need to do to improve their work further. Skilled teaching assistants work very effectively with individuals and groups of pupils. Teachers confidently use the interactive whiteboard to present exciting and fun activities which motivate pupils' interest and enthusiasm.

Outstanding care, guidance and support underpin pupils' excellent personal development and well-being. Good arrangements for starting school are appreciated by parents and visits to the high schools allay any concerns Year 6 pupils may have about the next stage of their education. Relevant required procedures are in place for child protection, safeguarding pupils and health and safety. Pupils who have additional educational needs are identified early and support is provided to enable them to make as much progress as their class mates. Pupils feel safe and confident that someone will listen to them if they are troubled. Pupils are polite and caring to

each other, know right from wrong and have a clear sense of fairness. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is excellent. The inspector received a delightful letter from the chair person of the school council explaining how elected members take their responsibilities seriously and ensure all pupils have an opportunity to 'have their say'. Pupils willingly accept jobs such as house captains, register monitors and play leaders and understand their contribution to the smooth running of the school day. Pupils organise events to raise money for charity, for example the local hospice and Cafod. Celebrations, such as carol services, give pupils the chance to join the wider community at the local church. By the time they leave Year 6, pupils have developed into mature, confident and sensible young people. Together with their excellent basic skills, they are extremely well prepared for the next stage in their education and for their later role as citizens in a diverse community.

The curriculum is good with an emphasis on the basic skills of literacy and numeracy; provision for ICT is particularly strong. Pupils' work in other subjects is also high and the award of Artsmark gold is well deserved. High quality pupils' work is tastefully displayed around the school; the art gallery celebrates framed pictures from all classes. In the entrance hall, scaled models, such as Henry VIII and his wives and Queen Victoria, are stunning. Pupils throughout the school enjoy learning French or Spanish and references to these languages are evident in the displays. Pupils take part in a very wide range of activities at lunchtime and after school. Enrichment activities include visits, visitors and an annual residential visit for Year 6. However, the school is not complacent and has plans to review the curriculum to provide more links between the subjects.

Leadership and management are outstanding. Although the experienced headteacher has been at the school a short time, she has quickly evaluated the effectiveness of its work, prioritised action and monitored decisions. She has been very effectively assisted in this by an excellent leadership team. As a result there is a shared understanding of strengths and weaknesses of the school and how to move it forward. Subject leaders are more confident in their roles and more able to support and assist other staff in the teaching of their subjects. The refined system for checking pupils' progress has led to a clearer understanding by staff and governors of the achievement of all pupils and where intervention is necessary. Governance is outstanding. The vice-chair of governors regularly meets with the headteacher and several governors work at the school. Consequently, governors have a good understanding of the day-to-day running of the school and have first hand knowledge of the impact of their decisions. Governors have a clear understanding of their role and are effective in monitoring and evaluating these decisions and holding the school to account. Individual governors effectively contribute valuable expertise to develop different aspects of the school. Since the arrival of the new headteacher, governors have reviewed the committee structure, leading to an efficient process for sharing information.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

The quality of education in the Foundation Stage (Reception) is good. Children join from a variety of pre-school settings and have skills which are comparable to most pupils of that age group, although number, knowledge and understanding, and physical skills are stronger than communication, language and literacy. Much emphasis is placed on developing independent skills, for example in the joint snack time, and speaking and listening. So, by the time they enter Key Stage 1, the majority of pupils have achieved standards expected for their age in all areas of learning. Parents appreciate the good arrangements for starting Reception, confident that their children will be well cared for, and as a result, pupils settle quickly into school routines.

Activities are led by adults but opportunities are also planned for children to follow their own curiosity. For example, a group of pupils playing in the sand challenged each other to fill the top of the container before the sand started to flow through the hole at the bottom; taking turns, there were many giggles, as they tried hard to 'beat the clock'. The outdoor area is effectively used to enhance learning opportunities and benefits from a covered area which can be used in all weathers. Although the accommodation is attractive and resources are plentiful within the Reception class, the school has recognised that this area of the school is in need of some updating.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that the refined tracking system enables teachers to accurately assess each pupil and provide them with their next steps to improve.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	1
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1
The effectiveness of the Foundation Stage	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	1

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1
How well learners enjoy their education	1
The attendance of learners	1
The behaviour of learners	1
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

Inspection of Birchley St Mary's Catholic Primary School, Wigan, WN5 7QJ

Thank you all very much for the friendly way in which you helped me when I visited your school recently. I really enjoyed chatting to you in the playground and in your classrooms. Thank you especially to the group who brought their books for me to look at and told me about the good things in your school. In fact no one could really think of anything they wanted to change!

Thank you also to the chair of the school council who wrote a letter to me about all the work the school council does in St Mary's.

You told me how much you enjoy coming to school and having spent the day with you, I can understand why. You go to an outstanding school which helps you to do really well in your tests; not only that, it also helps you to know how to stay safe, be healthy and enjoy your work and play - although some of you may want to think some more about what type of foods keep you healthy. Your parents are very pleased and proud that you attend St Mary's. You have super teachers who give you exciting and interesting activities to do and your new headteacher has made some changes which are already starting to make the school even better.

Everyone in school works very hard to make the school as good as it can be and I am confident that it will continue to improve. To help with this, I have asked Mrs Cropper and the staff to use the information they have about how well you are making progress to set targets and explain how you can make further progress. You can help by asking your teachers how well you are doing and what you need to do to get even better.

I am confident that the super pupils from St Mary's will continue to work hard and I wish you all the best for the future.