

St Nicholas CE VA Primary School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117434
Local Authority	HERTFORDSHIRE LA
Inspection number	312613
Inspection date	14 September 2007
Reporting inspector	Keith Sadler

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	142
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Fiona Rainsford
Headteacher	Mrs Ruth Mattison
Date of previous school inspection	8 September 2003
School address	Church Green Harpenden Hertfordshire AL5 2TP
Telephone number	01582 623620
Fax number	01582 623621

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by an Additional Inspector. The inspector evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the pupils' achievement and the school's procedures for the welfare and safeguarding of pupils. This included the child protection and health and safety arrangements. In addition, evidence was gathered from classroom observations and school documentation to evaluate the quality of the school's teaching and learning and also its leadership and management. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but the inspection 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 Nicholas is a smaller than average and very popular primary school. It is located in the centre of Harpenden and it serves the immediate community. A few pupils, most of whom worship at St Nicholas church, come from further afield. The socio-economic circumstances of parents are much above those typically found nationally. Almost all the pupils are from White British backgrounds and all have English as their first language. Children's attainment on entry to the Reception year is significantly above expected levels, with children having particularly strong personal, social, emotional and literacy skills.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

St Nicholas is a good school with some outstanding features and it is on an upward trend. It provides good value for money. One parent commented: 'Our children are all very happy. The school provides a varied, stimulating education. The children learn to become responsible, independent and to take care of each other'. Parents are unanimous in their support of the school. Pupils' achieve exceptionally high standards, make good progress in their academic development and outstanding progress in their personal development.

These things do not happen by chance. The leadership and management of the interim headteacher, who is exceptionally well supported by the new deputy head, are outstanding. Her leadership is typified by an open and searching attitude. Although the school has gone through a turbulent period that has seen a high turnover of staff, senior leaders have built a team of highly motivated teachers who are passionate about the school and are committed to bringing out the best from each pupil. Many staff have taken on new responsibilities for subjects. These teachers, in areas such as the Foundation Stage, science, history and geography, have made a good start and their leadership and management now need to bed down. Governors and parents support the school well, giving generously of their time. Following the arrival of the headteacher and deputy in the spring of 2006, there has been a very significant improvement in the way that all elements of the school's performance are rigorously checked. As a result, staff and governors have a clear understanding of strengths and points for development, and the high quality school development plan outlines an appropriate range of targets and strategies to improve provision and standards. This is a clear demonstration of the school's good capacity for further improvement.

All groups of pupils achieve well throughout the school from their above expected levels of attainment on entry to the Foundation Stage. In Reception, children make good progress and all reach the expected goals by the time that they enter Year 1, with a significant majority exceeding them. Progress is good in all year groups and, by the time they leave school, standards are exceptionally high in English, mathematics and science. In science, although standards have been significantly above average for the past five years, until the 2007 tests in which provisional results show much higher standards, they have not been quite as far above the national figures as English and mathematics. In history and geography, although reaching above expected levels, pupils' achievement is satisfactory because, until recently, progress was not monitored.

Pupils' personal development and well-being, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, are outstanding. Pupils enjoy and are proud of their school, as shown through the very high levels of attendance. They are enthusiastic and happy learners who feel safe and secure and know who to turn to for help. Pupils rightly say that behaviour is outstanding both in lessons and around the school. They also state that their teachers are nice and that they help them. 'I like it when we get really tricky challenges, and that is quite often', said one pupil. They respond well to the great many opportunities they have to make a positive contribution to the local community, particularly the church. The active school council, the 'buddy' system that links older and the youngest pupils together, and the house system enable pupils of all ages to take on individual and collective responsibilities in the school community. For example, two Year 6 pupils successfully led the day's worship from beginning to end. In this assembly, the celebration of good work helped to motivate pupils, especially those who have learning difficulties. The good curriculum supports the pupils' excellent knowledge about healthy

lifestyles and the importance of a balanced diet. They are very well prepared for the next stage of their education.

The school's provision is good. It is in these areas that, due to strong leadership and management, there have been particularly good improvements since the last inspection. The quality of teaching and learning is good. Classrooms are calm and purposeful because behaviour is managed in an affirming manner and teachers plan work that is well-matched to the pupils' needs. During the inspection some outstanding teaching was seen. Here pupils thrived on the challenge presented and the fierce pace of the lesson boosted learning. However, on occasion, the pace of learning can slow, particularly when staff spend too long introducing lessons. There have been good developments in the school's curriculum and the weaknesses in planning at the time of the last inspection have been removed. Senior leaders recently changed the organisation of the curriculum to make many subjects more relevant. At first governors were wary of this because they felt that standards might drop. However, there are positive indications that this is not the case. Governors realise that the move to broaden the curriculum and to link many subjects together has helped to raise pupils' interest and thirst for learning even more. There were important weaknesses in aspects of the care, guidance and support of pupils at the time of the last inspection. These, too, have been removed. The school takes good care of the pupils. Teaching assistants are deployed well. Consistent approaches to teaching pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities filter into all classes and enable these pupils to make good progress and achieve well. This is helped by the recently developed thorough assessment procedures which pinpoint where pupils are in their learning. The significant weaknesses in health and safety and child protection arrangements have been successfully addressed. These are now good and meet current regulations for the safeguarding of pupils.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

Children thrive in the Foundation Stage. Many parents commented on the high quality of the induction arrangements. Because these arrangements and the quality of teaching and learning and the curriculum are good, children do well. Their flying start is seen through the confidence, high self-esteem and security that they show during 'circle time' when children show high levels of maturity and understanding of routines. Recent improvements in the outdoor area now enable the teacher to plan more effectively for outdoor learning and she has good plans in place to ensure that all areas of the curriculum are developed outside.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning by making all teaching as good as the best.
- Raise attainment in history and geography by embedding the recent developments in the quality of teachers' plans and checking of progress.

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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?	2
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?	2
The effectiveness of the Foundation Stage	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2

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	1
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?	2
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?	2

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?	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2
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	2
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2
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

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

Dear Pupils,

St Nicholas CE VA Primary School, Hertfordshire AL5 2TP

I really enjoyed visiting your school. Thank you very much for the friendly way you welcomed me and for your help in finding out about the school.

Both you and your parents told me that you love school and that you feel safe and well cared for. I am not surprised. Yours is a good school and everybody who works there tries hard to help you to do well. Your teachers work hard to make sure that lessons are interesting and exciting. Your headteacher and deputy head have done an excellent job in making sure that you all work and play together in such a friendly way that helps to make the school successful. I was very impressed with your excellent behaviour and your positive attitudes to each other. Your teachers help you to learn well and also make sure that everyone feels part of the family of your school.

You work hard in lessons so that you learn lots of new things. Your progress is good and you attain very high standards in English, mathematics and science.

I have asked your teachers to do two things. Firstly, I have asked them to make sure that all lessons are as good as the best ones. Secondly, I have asked them to make sure that you make at least as good progress in history and geography as you do in other subjects. You can help by working hard to meet your targets.

Thank you once again for being so helpful to me.

With very best wishes for your future,

Keith Sadler

Lead Inspector