

St Swithun's VC Lower School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109604
Local Authority	Bedfordshire
Inspection number	324987
Inspection dates	24–25 November 2008
Reporting inspector	Robert Greatrex

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

The registered childcare, managed by the governing body, was inspected under section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006.

Type of school	First
School category	Voluntary controlled
Age range of pupils	3–9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	154
Government funded early education provision for children aged 3 to the end of the EYFS	0
Childcare provision for children aged 0 to 3 years	0
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Tracey Stock
Headteacher	Mrs Moya Whitehead
Date of previous school inspection	19 October 2005
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Ivel Road Sandy Bedfordshire SG19 1AX
Telephone number	01767 680692
Fax number	01767 690992

Age group	3–9
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

St. Swithun's Voluntary Controlled Lower School is smaller than average. The school has Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) classes, and children enter Nursery with skills and knowledge close to those expected of children of this age. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds is below average and few have English as an additional language, though the numbers are rising. Few pupils claim free school meals. An above average percentage has a statement of special educational need, while the percentage with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is similar to that found in most schools.

The headteacher was appointed in January 2008. The school holds the Healthy Schools and the International Schools Awards. A breakfast club is run on the site under the direction of the governing body.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

St. Swithun's is an improving school. It is moving forward in all aspects of its work, and the credit for this must go to the strong and decisive leadership of the headteacher who is well supported by staff and working closely with the effective governors. A strong feature of the school's work is its effectiveness in reaching out to parents as true partners in their children's development. The vast majority of parents are very positive about the quality of education provided. As one parent stated, 'I feel that the school has come on in leaps and bounds; I would recommend this school to anyone.' Pupils' personal development is good in this caring school, which gives them a broad range of learning experiences and looks to develop each pupil's skills and talents. The school knows its pupils well and caters for each, so that all can access learning. Pupils thrive, including those with learning difficulties and/ or disabilities, in a fully inclusive school.

Most strengths and areas for development are accurately identified through the school's increasingly rigorous self-evaluation. Management has put strategies in place to build on strengths and to rectify weaknesses. The full impact has not yet had time to show in sustained improvement in national test results. However, there is evidence of quickening progress in lessons this year and a determined approach to concerns such as provision in the EYFS indicating good capacity to continue improving. While there is strong leadership from the headteacher, subject leaders do not yet have enough involvement in monitoring the quality of teaching and learning to impact fully on raising standards and improving the quality of education. Because of this, leadership and management remain satisfactory overall. Efficient and effective governors are full and active partners in the school improvement.

Standards by the end of Year 4 are average and reflect pupils' satisfactory progress through the school, although standards in writing are lower than in reading and mathematics. Progress accelerates in their final year because of the impressive teaching they receive but the proportion of pupils gaining the higher levels in annual tests is below average. Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall but variable between classes. There is increasingly good practice as new ideas are introduced. The good curriculum is increasingly interesting pupils. Extra-curricular activities, visits and visitors are strong features which encourage new skills and promote pupils' enjoyment and good personal development. The school has worked successfully to help pupils to develop healthy lifestyles and to take on responsibilities, both in the school and local community. Together with their good behaviour and satisfactory but improving attendance, pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education. Information and communication technology (ICT) skills are particularly impressive. Pupils' understanding of the beliefs and cultures of others is strengthened by the content of the curriculum. Careful procedures help to ensure pupils' health and safety and add to their strong sense of security in school. The school works very closely with others to offer useful extended services that are practical and relevant to the community's needs. The school's well-established links with outside agencies strengthen good guidance and support systems. Targets are in place for pupils and, in most classes, give them a clear focus on how to improve their work.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 3

Unexpected staffing changes, beyond the control of the school, have impacted adversely on the provision for Reception children. As a result, the headteacher is taking a more 'hands-on'

role in the EYFS. The school recognises that, while leadership and management are now satisfactory, there is much to do to improve provision. For example, assessment is undertaken but it is not yet precise enough to identify the next steps in learning and include these in planning.

Provision is satisfactory in Reception and Nursery classes, with strengths in the good care and individual support for children in the Nursery. Children make good progress especially in their personal development and keenness to learn throughout Nursery. By the time they start in Reception, their attainments are similar to those expected for their age.

In the Nursery, there is a good balance between activities directed by adults and those chosen by children and the stimulating outdoor learning environment is used to good advantage. In Reception, currently, there is too much time sitting and listening and the headteacher is already addressing this through better planning. Achievement is satisfactory. Children are taught letter sounds and names, but the skills to develop early writing and reading are not yet taught rigorously enough. Good links are established with parents through home visits prior to children starting school. Parents are welcomed warmly into school and encouraged to contribute to their children's learning.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards and the rate of progress in reading and mathematics for higher attainers, and in writing for all pupils.
- Improve the quality of teaching and learning to a consistently good or better level.
- Raise standards in EYFS by:
 - ensuring better provision for Reception children
 - refining assessment procedures so that next steps in learning can be planned more precisely.
- Develop the role of subject leaders to include responsibility for helping to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an OfSTED inspector before their next Section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Pupils' achievement is satisfactory through the school. Standards are broadly average in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Year 2, and the trend in all three subjects is upwards. This is particularly true of writing, which has improved recently but remains lower because of inconsistencies in practice as good new systems are not yet implemented consistently. In all three subjects, the proportion achieving higher than expected levels is lower than generally found nationally. Pupils consolidate their knowledge and understanding well through Years 3 and 4, and make particularly rapid progress in their final year. Those pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make sound progress because their needs are identified early and good support is put in place for them. The school has accurately identified specific weaknesses, such as girls' numeracy, and taken the right steps to begin to resolve them. Coupled with other recent improvements, such as better use of targets to track pupils' rate of learning, progress is beginning to quicken.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Pupils enjoy coming to school and most demonstrate this with their improving attendance rates. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. The status of an International School award has a good impact on pupils' understanding of cultures other than their own, although they have limited experience of visiting places of worship other than their local church. Similarly, working towards Eco awards is helping pupils develop a good understanding of issues such as re-cycling and energy conservation. Pupils behave well, listen attentively and work cooperatively when required. At playtimes, pupils are considerate to one another and play happily together. They say there is no bullying in the school and are confident that, should they have any worries, an adult would help them. Pupils are positive about learning and enjoy lessons. They know what is needed for a healthy and a safe life and enjoy taking part in the good variety of physical activities provided. They readily accept responsibility as school councillors and playground pals. They are well involved in the local community through links with the church, charity fundraising and performing in concerts. Pupils' satisfactory level of literacy and numeracy skills, their ability to work together and their positive attitudes to work and to each other provide a good basis for their next school and later life.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Although recent initiatives have resulted in a growing amount of outstanding and good teaching, most is satisfactory with the result that pupils' progress is also satisfactory. There are common strengths, which include positive relationships between teachers and pupils and good subject knowledge of teachers. Teaching assistants are very effective and support pupils closely to enable them to access learning quickly. Struggling pupils succeed because of the good balance of nurture and challenge. However, learning objectives are not always clear enough for pupils to know the purpose of the lesson. The use of assessment, too, varies. Whilst tracking of pupils' progress gives accurate information about the standards they reach, tasks are not regularly matched closely enough to pupils' current levels to accelerate their progress, particularly that of higher attainers. Lessons increasingly give opportunities for pupils to learn for themselves and to solve problems, which add to their enjoyment of learning.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Teachers plan good links between subjects so that lessons are interesting and provide meaningful reasons for writing which are increasing pupils' enthusiasm. A good range of visits and visitors also enriches lessons. Staff use ICT effectively within other subjects providing good opportunities for pupils to practise their skills and become confident and quick in a range of applications. Pupils learn how to stay safe and be healthy through interesting topics in personal, social and health education. They have good opportunities to take part in physical activities in lessons and after school. The curriculum is carefully and sensitively modified for pupils who need extra help. It often includes good extension activities for the more able when they are withdrawn for group work, though such strategies are less evident in regular lessons. Provision is enriched through specialist music tuition and the teaching of French.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The school provides good care, guidance and support for its pupils. The effective support given to pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities helps them to feel valued members of their class and the school community. Appropriate procedures for safeguarding and for child protection are in place. The school has good systems for checking how well pupils are doing and for setting whole school targets for improvement. Setting pupils targets and reviewing these with them are relatively new initiatives that are already clearly having a beneficial impact. Pupils are aware of their targets and are keen to attain them. Marking is generally good, particularly in Year 4 where pupils are very clear what they need to do to improve their work. The popular and well attended breakfast club is well run and provides good quality care for the pupils who attend.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The headteacher's determination to move the school forward and her accurate identification of the areas for improvement are being backed by very appropriate strategies, which are beginning to move the school forward confidently. Solid foundations have been laid which are resulting in improved pupil progress. The headteacher's strong leadership, improvements so far and careful planning for the future give the school a good capacity for improvement. The work of the senior leadership team is improving and beginning to strengthen the school further. However, this is very much a developing school and the impact of leadership and management are currently satisfactory and improving. Committed subject leaders, some new to their roles, have yet to have an impact on the quality of teaching and learning. The governors are very well-organised with a very clear structure to their work and procedures so that they are efficient and effective. St Swithun's is a very inclusive school. The school promotes good community cohesion through such initiatives as extended services, links with the parish and local and international schools.

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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?	3
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?	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

How effective is the provision in meeting the needs of children in the EYFS?	3
How well do children in the EYFS achieve?	3
How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the children in the EYFS?	3
How effectively are children in the EYFS helped to learn and develop?	3
How effectively is the welfare of children in the EYFS promoted?	3
How effectively is provision in the EYFS led and managed?	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	3

¹Grade 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.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	2
The attendance of learners	3
The behaviour of learners	2
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	3
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

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	2
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3
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

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

26 November 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of St Swithun's VC Lower School, Sandy, SG19 1AX.

Thank you for making us welcome when we visited your school. We enjoyed seeing you learn and play and hearing from you about all that you do. We could see you enjoy school and feel safe and well cared for. We were pleased that you do lots of school activities and that you like all the different visits and visitors. This letter will tell you what else we found out.

We agree with you and your parents that your school is getting better. Your new headteacher, with the staff and governors, has made some improvements. We have asked them to make it better still in these ways.

- The standards you reach and the progress you make in reading, writing and mathematics are satisfactory, but we know you can do better than this.
- At present most teaching is satisfactory, but when teaching is good you make quicker progress, and we want to see more good teaching so you do better.
- Your school should improve what happens in the two youngest classes, especially in the Reception class, so that those children are always given activities that are not too hard and not too easy.
- Subject leaders should check the teaching and what you learn in the different subjects to see how they can be made better.

Your behaviour and involvement in school life are good and help you to be well prepared for your next school. You are using your targets well to help you to move on in your learning.

We send you our best wishes and hope that you will continue to work hard in school and make the most of all the opportunities you are given.

Yours sincerely

Robert Greatrex

Lead inspector