

St Mary and St Thomas Aquinas Catholic Primary School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	108392
Local Authority	Gateshead
Inspection number	309679
Inspection date	4 October 2007
Reporting inspector	Rosemary Rodger

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	3-11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	204
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Bernard Lynch
Headteacher	Miss Elaine White
Date of previous school inspection	1 June 2004
School address	Stella Lane Blaydon-on-Tyne Tyne and Wear NE21 4NE
Telephone number	0191 4143116
Fax number	0191 4143116

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one Additional Inspector.

The inspector evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated achievement and standards, the quality of teaching and learning and leadership and management. Evidence was gathered from discussions with the staff, governors and pupils, work and document scrutiny and observations of teaching and learning in lessons. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but inspectors 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

This is an average sized school situated in a semi-rural area on the outskirts of Gateshead. All pupils are of White British heritage. The proportion of pupils eligible for a free school meal is below average, as is the proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The school has achieved its tenth Healthy School Award. It also has a Basic Skills Quality Mark and International School status. It was recently awarded the Primary School of the Year award by a national newspaper.

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 and St Thomas Aquinas School superbly lives up to its mission statement, 'to provide a haven of security and safety that will enable and encourage confidence and happiness to flourish'. Everyone is treated with equal levels of respect and all groups of pupils achieve exceptionally well. Parents' views capture the strong ethos of the school, as one put it: 'the school is a family with an excellent ethos for care, learning and development'.

This is an outstandingly effective school in which the expectation that pupils achieve their best is at the heart of all priorities and decision-making. The school consistently delivers excellent achievement and exceptionally high standards in English, mathematics and science. There is a committed and very talented team of staff led by an inspirational and very hardworking headteacher. Her core purpose to provide vision, leadership and strategic direction is achieved very successfully. A particular strength is the importance attached to securing professional development for the staff and the partnerships with other schools and colleges to disseminate the best practice and to bring fresh ideas and innovation into school. The school is rightly proud of all its achievements. Its international links are extensive and have an important impact on the pupils' understanding of the richness of other cultures and traditions. This is well exemplified in, for example, the school's excellent partnership with schools in France and Malta which has led to joint activities facilitated by e-mail and web blogs.

A high priority is given to sustaining pupils' excellent personal development and well-being. As a result, pupils develop into mature, sensible and responsible citizens, proud of their school and confident towards those who visit it. Behaviour is outstanding. According to the pupils, their roles as buddies and the improvements to playtime equipment mean that everyone is so busy playing they do not get involved in arguments. Attitudes in lessons are excellent. Pupils listen and contribute sensibly and with great confidence. Pupils' enjoyment is aptly captured in their excellent attendance which has improved in the past year. They understand the benefits to themselves of eating healthily and keeping fit by engaging in well attended after-school clubs such as Irish dancing, football, gymnastics and netball.

The quality of teaching is outstanding. This is very effectively demonstrated in the quality and quantity of work completed by pupils in the first few weeks of this term. Teaching is confident because it is informed by excellent subject knowledge and the creative use of information and communication technology (ICT) to help explanations and demonstrations. For example, Year 6 pupils developed an understanding of 'parenthesis' as they improved a simple account of the journey of a sailing vessel they recently visited. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities work confidently alongside their peers. Lesson planning is exemplary because it caters for the wide ability ranges in each class, has clearly stated learning intentions and places excellent emphasis on reviewing what pupils have learned through well planned opportunities for discussion and reflection. This was illustrated well in Year 3 literacy lessons. Assessment procedures are equally exemplary and used to great effect by staff to challenge pupils who need to make more progress. Pupils say they know how to improve their work because meticulous marking helps them to know what to do and they all have targets for literacy and numeracy clearly visible in their books. Pupils check their progress against these targets regularly and are routinely involved in decisions about what needs to be improved and how.

The excellent curriculum provides a wealth of cross-curricular themes throughout the year. There are project weeks when specialists, including artists and musicians, work in school; and

also rich and worthwhile opportunities to apply basic literacy, numeracy and ICT skills. The passports designed by all pupils from Nursery through to Year 6 admirably capture the way pupils make progress in applying their literacy and ICT skills linked to a recent whole school topic on flight. The curriculum is enriched particularly effectively by the international schools links. As a result, pupils are aware of the richness and diversity across the world. Participation in local events, team games and after-school sports clubs, along with specialist coaching, enrich learning exceptionally well. The school council in partnership with others sell jewellery as a contribution to a local charity. The care, guidance and support provided for pupils are outstanding. Safety, accident and risk assessment records are meticulously maintained. The headteacher and chair of governors have completed safeguarding training and the arrangements to meet all requirements for this are fully in place. The governors have a major role in ensuring pupils are kept safe and secure in school. External agencies are called upon promptly to deal with any concerns about pupils' learning or personal development.

Leadership and management are outstanding. The headteacher is ably assisted by a highly effective deputy headteacher and has the support of a very committed team of staff and governors. Everyone plays a vital role in sustaining the excellence of the school. Day-to-day administration is highly effective and much appreciated by parents. The undoubted success of the school rests on the high expectations set at every level. This is clearly evident in the immaculate organisation of classrooms, the vibrant, high quality displays, the rigour with which performance is evaluated and challenging targets met, and the consistently high standards and excellent achievement over the past six years. Self-evaluation is a thorough and accurate reflection of the school's priorities and strengths and is fully corroborated by the inspection. The school improvement plan provides a remarkable insight into the depth of analysis of pupils' achievement. It demonstrates exactly what needs to be improved to raise standards even further and has at its centre the maintenance and improvement of pupils' learning and enjoyment. The school has an excellent capacity to improve and undoubtedly has improved since their last inspection, although at that time, they were not given any areas for improvement.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

Children start the Nursery with standards that are generally typical of their age. They make good progress in all areas of learning, so by the time they leave the Reception class standards in all areas of learning are above the expectation for this age. Children work in two separate, well resourced, classrooms with daily access to a range of outdoor activities covering learning in all areas. The quality of teaching is good, providing many opportunities for children to work with adults on focused activities. Sometimes children in the Nursery are not given enough opportunities to choose for themselves what they want to do. This limits the development of their independence and learning how to make choices and take responsibility. Activities planned are appropriately practical, for example, the sampling of fruits when making a fruit salad and children delighted in their efforts to make a healthy snack. Planning is comprehensive and includes very specific learning intentions, although sometimes there is not always sufficient priority given to developing key language skills. Children are well cared for and detailed records of their progress are kept. There is good continuity of assessment information between the Nursery and Reception classes. Recent staffing changes mean that the new leader is very recently in place, but her role is developing well.

What the school should do to improve further

- The school has no areas to improve that are not already being tackled.

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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	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?	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1
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

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

5 October 2007

Dear Pupils

Inspection of St Mary and St Thomas Aquinas Catholic Primary School, Gateshead, NE21 4NE

What a wonderful day I spent in your school recently. You go to an outstanding school. Thank you all for making my day so enjoyable. I really appreciated your politeness and the ready welcome you gave me as I walked around school and visited your classes.

There is so much that is excellent in your school, I will try not to miss anything out. First of all, you all work very hard and reach very high standards in the tests and assessments you complete each year. However, that is not the only time you reach high standards. Your work in your books, the displays, your behaviour and your enjoyment of school are all equally excellent. The school has talented and creative staff who make your learning exciting and help you to do your best.

Next, there are the excellent links made with schools in other countries. Don't you wish you were Barnaby Bear? Your displays show that some of you have visited several countries and learn about other countries in school. I know the staff sometimes visit other schools and they bring back good ideas for you. Finally, I would like to say that there is nothing the school needs to do to make it better that it is not doing already. This means that your school is really excellent. I trust you will continue to enjoy your time and continue to work hard.

Best wishes

Rosemary Rodger

Lead Inspector