

St Nicholas' School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	119059
Local Authority	Kent
Inspection number	326935
Inspection dates	27–28 April 2009
Reporting inspector	Mike Kell

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	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	4–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	143
Sixth form	26
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	Roger O'Shea
Headteacher	Daniel Lewis
Date of previous school inspection	12 July 2006
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Holme Oak Close Nunnery Fields Canterbury CT1 3JJ
Telephone number	01227 464316
Fax number	01227 766883

Age group	4–19
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors.

Description of the school

St Nicholas is an area special school for pupils with profound, severe and complex learning difficulties. All of the pupils have a statement of special educational needs for these types of learning difficulty. There are significantly more boys than girls on roll and the vast majority of pupils are of White British origin. Just less than 10% of pupils are in public care and 30% are entitled to free school meals. There are only a few children in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Post-16 students are located a short distance away from the main school in a new purpose built block on the site of Canterbury College. Extensive building works have taken place on the main site too, since the previous inspection. These include both new accommodation and a wide-ranging refurbishment programme.

The school has an Artsmark and a Healthy School award. It is a regional centre for the Movement Opportunities in Education (MOVE) programme. This activity-based programme involves teachers, therapists, support staff and families and aims to help severely disabled children to develop basic physical skills, such as sitting, standing and walking. Since September 2006, school staff have been very heavily involved in the work of a local child observation and assessment unit. None of the children who go there are on the school roll, and so they were not observed. However, a number of them subsequently move into St Nicholas following assessment.

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 School provides a good quality of education. It is equally effective in meeting the learning and personal needs of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage, pupils in school and students in the post-16 department. This represents good improvement since the previous inspection. It has occurred because school leaders and managers, supported by governors, responded well to the findings of that report. Leadership and management are good. There is a strong and effective focus on raising the achievement of all pupils, and there is good capacity for the school to develop further. The majority of parents and carers appreciate greatly the work that the school does and confirm that their children enjoy being there. One parent summed up the views of many with the comment: 'My child has no verbal skills and yet her non-verbal communication and animated excitement when she sees her school speaks volumes.'

Pupils make good progress academically even though the severity and complexity of their learning needs mean that standards are well below the national averages for all age groups. They achieve well because lessons are fun and interesting. Good teaching engages the pupils and so they learn quickly. Classes have a high number of teaching assistants and they generally provide good support to pupils in managing their behaviour and in making the most of learning opportunities. They do this most efficiently when they have been very clearly briefed about their precise role, although not all teachers do this consistently well. Consequently, there are occasions when the support provided by teaching assistants is not fully effective. Pupils follow a good curriculum that is enriched very well by educational visits and a stimulating programme of extra-curricular activities. Most pupils experience a broad and balanced variety of learning opportunities throughout each day. However, in some primary phase classes learning opportunities are missed during extended breaks that lack formal planning. There are also instances of pupils getting ready too early for home transport and thereby missing learning opportunities.

The outstanding level of care, guidance and support that the school provides is a very important contributory factor to the rate at which pupils make academic progress. Accurate assessment procedures provide the information that teachers need to support and guide individual pupils' learning. Equally effective systems give staff a wealth of information about all aspects of pupils' personal development. They use this information very well to help pupils to develop as young people. Consequently, pupils make outstanding progress in their personal development. Their behaviour and attitudes are excellent and they have a very good understanding of how to remain healthy and stay safe. The school makes very good use of its excellent partnerships to ensure that pupils are put in the best possible position to learn. A range of therapists make a very important contribution to pupils' well-being and very strong links with partner schools provide substantial learning and social opportunities.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Students achieve well during their time in the post-16 department. Well-planned transfer arrangements from the main school ensure a smooth transition into the post-16 department and so staff know the students and their capabilities very well. Therefore, lessons are well planned to meet individual needs and so students learn at a good rate, including those with additional or more complex learning difficulties. Learning activities are appropriate to students' ages and interests and so they participate eagerly and with understanding. The curriculum is

good, with particular strengths in sport, creative arts and work-related learning. Students have access to a good range of courses and accreditation, including some courses that are taught in the main college. This helps to prepare them very well for leaving college, as does the excellent progress that they make in their personal development. Their very positive attitudes and behaviour help to stand them in good stead for the future. Students receive an excellent quality of care, and very good pastoral and academic guidance and support. Effective leadership and management have driven forward good improvements since the previous inspection. These include the introduction of a residential experience, the development of work experience placements and the strengthening of links with partners, which are now excellent. There is good capacity for further development.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

Good leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage have produced a stimulating, safe and very caring environment in which children thrive and enjoy their learning. Children get off to a flying start when they enter the school thanks to its very close link with the local child assessment unit. Staff are able to forge very good relationships with parents before children even enter the school. Effective partnerships with colleagues from other agencies, such as medical services, are also established at that time and so staff have a very good understanding of the children and their needs before school admission. Consequently, teachers provide learning activities that closely match children's individual needs. Therefore, children acquire new skills and understanding quickly and achieve well in all areas of learning. They make outstanding progress in their personal and social development because staff plan many opportunities for them to experience new situations and challenges and to interact and communicate with others.

What the school should do to improve further

- Check regularly that all the time available for learning is planned and used most effectively.
- Ensure that all teaching assistants are enabled to make the most effective contribution to pupils' learning and personal development as a result of teachers' efficient management of their roles.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Standards are inevitably well below average because of pupils' learning difficulties. Pupils achieve well, however, because they learn at a good pace as activities are challenging and matched closely to their capabilities. Consequently, they make good progress in acquiring key literacy, numeracy and communication skills, including the use of computers and other electronic communication aids. As a result, they achieve well in the good range of accredited courses that they follow in Years 10 and 11. While pupils make good progress overall, time is not always used most efficiently and on those occasions this slows the rate of their progress. A particularly impressive feature of the school is the way in which it meets the learning needs of all pupils. Consequently, more vulnerable groups, such as those entitled to free school meals or in public care, achieve in line with their classmates. Pupils with the most complex medical and/or behavioural needs are enabled to succeed too. Much of their success is due to what the school refers to as the Shared Goals programme. This involves teachers and therapists working very well together, with the input of parents, in planning specific targets and strategies to accelerate

these pupils' progress. Specialist teaching contributes greatly to the good progress made by pupils with severe autism, and the input of learning mentors helps pupils who are experiencing short-term difficulties to maintain their rate of progress. Pupils with particularly complex physical and/or sensory difficulties follow a supplementary programme, which the school calls active education. This improves their posture, movement and mobility, thereby enabling them to become more involved in their own learning and to achieve well.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

The effort that the school puts into developing all aspects of pupils' personal development pays rich dividends. They make outstanding progress in their social, moral, spiritual and cultural development. Pupils become increasingly confident and independent as they improve their communication and self-help skills. Their self-esteem rises significantly in an environment where they feel very safe and where their behaviour is outstanding. They begin to make correct choices on a regular basis, experience success in their social interactions and develop a growing awareness of the world around them. Pupils confirm that they love being at school and really enjoy everything that it has to offer. They are enthusiastic about healthy eating and about activities that contribute to a healthy lifestyle. Attendance is good overall, but the medical conditions of a significant minority prevent them from attending as regularly as most. Pupils are very well prepared for leaving school. Their efforts are rewarded with examination successes, and the very substantial progress that they make in their social development gives them a strong platform for interacting and working with others. Consequently, all of those who left Year 11 in 2008 transferred into college successfully. Positive relationships are a strength throughout the school. Although pupils' learning needs limit the extent to which they can contribute to the wider community, all pupils make a strong contribution towards the school community in the good progress they make in relating to each other and to staff. In addition, some pupils and students make further valuable contributions through their involvement in the school and student councils.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Pupils' learning proceeds at a good pace. They are taught effectively by teachers who have in-depth knowledge of the most effective strategies to use because of, for instance, the invaluable information supplied by multi-disciplinary teams in the Shared Goals programme. Teachers use assessment information just as productively to plan activities that build on pupils' prior achievements. By matching activities so closely to pupils' capabilities, teachers promote the small gains in learning in lessons that result in pupils making good progress over time. In most cases, teaching assistants contribute well to pupils' learning as they know exactly what is expected of them. Therefore, they use, for example, exactly the right forms of communication to facilitate pupils' involvement and they know how to balance an expectation of independent work with prompts and support. However, on some occasions teachers do not manage and deploy teaching assistants quite so efficiently and this reduces their impact. Pupils' behaviours are usually managed efficiently and with minimum fuss, causing little disruption to others. Pupils in Years 7 to 9 are regrouped according to need for subjects such as English, mathematics and science. This allows teachers to use their expertise most effectively by teaching their subject to the different groups. This makes an important contribution to pupils' good learning.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum has a strong and appropriate focus on personal, social and health education and on developing literacy and numeracy skills. Teachers plan many opportunities to promote and reinforce these key features through all subjects of the curriculum. A strong commitment to the arts, both expressive and creative, is also evident and the learning opportunities that such subjects provide make a good contribution to pupils' personal development. The MOVE programme, use of the hydrotherapy pool, sessions of soft play and time in the sensory room are used well to meet the individual curriculum needs of pupils with specific difficulties and disabilities. The curriculum needs of more capable pupils are addressed equally well through inclusion programmes with mainstream schools. Planned community-based learning, such as visits to the shops, and visitors into school, widens pupils' experiences well and contributes much to their personal development. Many pupils take advantage of a very good range of school clubs to pursue existing interests and to develop new ones. Most pupils benefit fully from this good range of learning opportunities throughout the school day and beyond. In some instances, however, time is not always used productively. Extended breaks for younger pupils are not always planned to maximise learning opportunities and some pupils are given more time than they need to get ready for home transport.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Pupils are looked after extremely well. The levels of care and welfare are very high. The full range of therapy support is very well integrated into the care provided. Links with support services are excellent. All safeguarding procedures are securely in place and incidents are recorded appropriately. The quality of pastoral guidance and support is excellent. The school is particularly effective in responding to its monitoring of individual pupils' personal development. By tracking pupils so carefully and evaluating their behaviours, the school is very well placed to implement individual support systems that identify targets and the strategies that help pupils to achieve them. Pupils' academic progress is monitored equally constructively. Their achievements are used as the basis for setting challenging targets, such as in individual education plans, and pupils attain the targets thanks to very high levels of staff support and guidance.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Even though the main school and the post-16 department are on separate sites, leadership and management are consistently good. School leaders are supported well by an effective governing body that provides an appropriate balance of challenge and support. Good leadership ensures that the outcomes of the school's accurate self-evaluation are used to identify priorities and drive forward change. Effective management procedures result in data on pupils' personal and academic development being collated and analysed critically. This enables leaders and managers to check the performance of individual pupils and groups of pupils. If relative underperformance is suspected, leaders are very good at seeking out the reasons why, such as disruptions in the home or medically induced absences, and then putting in individual support programmes. The school acknowledges that certain aspects of its monitoring, notably to ensure that curriculum

time and support staff are utilised fully, need to be strengthened. The school makes a good contribution to community cohesion. Within the school, leaders' very strong commitment to equal opportunity ensures that any obstacles that prevent an individual from making progress are identified and dealt with. In terms of the wider community, the school makes a valuable contribution through its work as a regional centre for the MOVE programme and through its involvement in the local child observation and assessment unit. Although few pupils live in the immediate local neighbourhood the school has carried out an audit of its current position and has identified ways in which it can further promote this particular area of its work. This is characteristic of its progressive thinking, as is its successful submission for specialist status for cognition and learning with effect from September 2009.

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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	16-19
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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	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

How effective is the provision in meeting the needs of children in the EYFS?	2	
How well do children in the EYFS achieve?	2	
How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the children in the EYFS?	1	
How effectively are children in the EYFS helped to learn and develop?	2	
How effectively is the welfare of children in the EYFS promoted?	1	
How effectively is provision in the EYFS led and managed?	2	

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	2	

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?	1	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	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	1	
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	1	

The quality of provision

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

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	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	2	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	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**

29 April 2009

Dear Pupils and Students

Inspection of St Nicholas School, Canterbury, CT1 3JJ

We really enjoyed the two days that we spent in your school. Thank you for making us feel so welcome and a special thanks to those who gave up their time to talk with us. You told us that St Nicholas is a good school and we agree with you.

You make good progress in your work. Lessons are fun because teachers give you interesting things to do and so you learn a lot. You go on many visits out of school and there are lots of lunchtime clubs. It is very good to see that many of you go to these clubs. You make lots and lots of progress as young people. You go to school as often as you can and behave very well. You know a great deal about how to stay fit and healthy. The staff look after you very well and they take a lot of care of you. They are very good at helping you to get ready for leaving school or college.

The people who run your school do a good job. They have lots of ideas about how they can make things even better. We have given them two more.

- Check that you are busy all day long doing lots of different things.
- Make sure that all the adults in your class can do as much as possible to help you.

I am sure that all of you want St Nicholas to remain a good school. You can help to make sure that this happens by continuing to go to school as much as you can and working hard while you are there.

Thank you once again and I wish all of you the best of luck in the future, especially if you are leaving school or college this year.

Yours faithfully

Mike Kell Lead inspector