

Inspection of a good school: St Mary's Catholic First School, Dorchester

Lucetta Lane, Dorchester, Dorset DT1 2DD

Inspection dates:

10 and 11 January 2023

Outcome

St Mary's Catholic First School, Dorchester continues to be a good school.

What is it like to attend this school?

Every pupil receives a very warm and positive welcome at the start of each day. Pupils thrive at this friendly, vibrant school. They love learning alongside their friends. Pupils feel part of a family fully focused on helping them succeed and feel safe. There are high levels of pastoral support in place.

Leaders have high expectations and pupils work hard to meet these. Their determination is for all pupils to be the best that they can be. Pupils behave well around the school. At breaktimes, pupils play well together, keeping active by using outdoor equipment and playing games that adults organise for them. On the very rare occasions that bullying happens, pupils are confident that it will be dealt with quickly.

The development of the whole child is kept at the heart of leaders' work. Leaders are keen for pupils to learn about life in their own community and beyond it. Parents value the broad range of activities their children get to experience. Pupils engage in clubs and trips that link to their learning and interests. Many of them take part in creative, sporting or cultural activities the school offers. These events support their spiritual and character development really well.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders have designed a broad and ambitious curriculum. They have identified the knowledge that pupils need to learn, right from the start of pre-school. In some areas, for example in reading and mathematics, pupils develop knowledge in a clear sequence that builds over time. This enables pupils to make secure connections between topics that help them to remember their learning. As a result, pupils achieve well. However, in a small number of foundation subjects, the key knowledge and the precise order to learn it is not well developed.

Leaders have an effective system in place to identify and meet the needs of pupils who need additional help. Teachers are supported well to adapt tasks in all subjects to meet

the needs of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). As a result, pupils with SEND are supported well to develop their knowledge and skills across the curriculum.

Leaders prioritise reading. Children in Reception learn phonics right from the start, using an effective programme. In the early stages of learning to read, pupils read books containing the phonic sounds they know. This means that pupils quickly become fluent readers. Pupils enjoy reading and talk confidently about books. They love story time and are clearly engrossed when teachers read aloud to them.

Behaviour and attitudes are impressive. Pupils are engaged in their learning. From the start of pre-school, children follow well-established rules and routines. Pupils are polite, considerate and welcoming to visitors. Pupils benefit from the school's embedded characteristics of learning, such as 'go for it gorilla'. These help pupils understand and symbolise what perseverance, feeling proud or being creative look or feel like.

The school's work to support pupils' wider development is a strength. Pupils experience a wealth of carefully planned opportunities that enhance the curriculum and build life skills. Work to develop pupils' character is strong. For example, Year 4 pupils have the chance to attend an annual residential, and pupils take part in a wide range of competitive sporting events. Leaders have introduced a range of therapeutic approaches to support pupils' mental health, including strategies to solve problems and to recognise solutions shown by others. Sustainability projects, through the strong work of the eco council, help pupils learn deeply about environmental responsibility.

Leaders inspire, motivate and develop staff. They provide a clear direction and listen to the views of staff and pupils. Leaders have planned a programme of high-quality staff training to develop teachers' subject knowledge and how to support pupils' mental health. Because of this, staff feel empowered and part of a strong team with a clear purpose. Staff say that leaders are approachable and mindful of their well-being and workload.

Trustees and governors are knowledgeable and skilled. They work seamlessly alongside leaders and know the school's strengths and next steps. Ambitious strategic plans are developed and checked that they are working as intended. As a result, governance is highly effective.

Parents are incredibly supportive of the school. One parent, reflecting the views of many, said, 'We just love the 'family' feel to the school where everyone is treated with respect and kindness.'

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders have established a strong culture of safeguarding. There are clear systems in place to identify pupils who are at risk of harm. Leaders tackle all concerns about pupils as soon as they are identified. Leaders make sure that children and families in need of additional support access this quickly when they need it. Record-keeping is thorough and

systematic. Procedures for checking and training staff are strong. Pupils are taught about risk and how to manage it. They have clear, age-appropriate knowledge of how to keep themselves safe online and know where to go for help if they need to.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- In a small number of foundation subjects, the curriculum is not yet designed and sequenced sufficiently well. Consequently, pupils do not consistently achieve as well as they could in these subjects. Leaders need to refine the curriculum so that it identifies the precise sequenced, foundational knowledge that pupils must know and remember.

Background

When we have judged a school to be good, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains good. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection, which is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

This is the first ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good in January 2017.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, '[disadvantaged pupils](#)' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route.

School details

Unique reference number	140771
Local authority	Dorset
Inspection number	10212391
Type of school	Primary
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	2 to 9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	186 (includes pre-school)
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Ruth O'Donovan
Headteacher	Paula Fearn (Executive Headteacher)
Website	www.stmarysdorchester.dorset.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	25 January 2017, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- St Mary's Catholic First School became part of the Plymouth CAST multi-academy trust in January 2015.
- A section 48 inspection to evaluate the distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Mary's as a Catholic school took place in November 2022.
- The school has a breakfast club and an after-school club operating on the site. This provision is managed by the school.
- There is an on-site pre-school provision, St Mary's Haycorns Pre-School, which includes places for two-year-olds upwards.
- The school does not currently use any alternative provision.
- The executive headteacher also leads another school in the trust, St Mary and St Joseph Catholic Primary School, since September 2022.
- A new substantive special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) began working at the school in September 2022.

Information about this inspection

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The inspector discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and has taken that into account in his evaluation of the school.
- The inspector held meetings with the executive headteacher, assistant headteacher and SENCo.
- The inspector met with two local governors, including the chair of governors. The inspector held a separate meeting with a representative from the trust's central team.
- The inspector carried out deep dives in these subjects: reading, mathematics and physical education. Deep dives included visiting a range of lessons, looking at pupils' work and talking with leaders, teachers and pupils about how teaching in these subjects builds pupils' knowledge over time. The inspector also heard pupils read to a known adult.
- The inspector checked a wide range of safeguarding documentation, including the single central record. He also reviewed the school's records for child protection and assessed the school's culture of safeguarding throughout the inspection.
- The inspector reviewed a range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation, school improvement plan and relevant school policies.
- Parents' responses to the Ofsted Parent View questionnaire, along with their written comments, were considered. The inspector also talked with parents on the morning of the second day of inspection.
- Pupils' views about their learning, what behaviour is like at the school and whether they felt safe were considered. The inspector also talked to pupils about their views on personal development and the wider school curriculum.
- The inspector met with a range of staff to gather their views on how leaders support them and took account of their responses to the staff questionnaire.

Inspection team

Gareth Flemington, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

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