

St Vincent's School for Blind and Partially Sighted Children

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	104734
Local Authority	Liverpool
Inspection number	324097
Inspection date	4 December 2008
Reporting inspector	Michael McDowell

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.

Boarding provision
Social care URN
Social care inspector

The inspection of social care was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

Type of school	Special
School category	Non-maintained special
Age range of pupils	4–17
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	40
Sixth form	14
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	Mr T Bates
Headteacher	Mr Stephen Roberts
Date of previous school inspection	19 October 2005
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected

Age group	4–17
Inspection date	4 December 2008
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Date of previous childcare inspection

Not previously inspected

School address

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Age group 4-17

Inspection date 4 December 2008

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out jointly by an Additional Inspector and a Social Care Inspector.

Description of the school

St Vincent's is a Catholic residential school for blind and partially sighted children. It is maintained by a charitable trust. Pupils are drawn from the Merseyside area but also from Wales, the North of England and the North Midlands. About half of the pupils board at the school between one and four nights per week. Most pupils are White and British but a small minority are Asian British of Indian or Pakistani heritage. A very small number of children are looked after by the local authority. The school has provision for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) but none were on roll at the time of the inspection. The majority of pupils have learning difficulties and/or disabilities in addition to their visual impairment. These include autistic spectrum disorder, moderate and severe learning difficulties, hearing impairment and a range of physical and medical disorders. All pupils have a statement of special educational need. Because of the nature of their learning difficulties and/or disabilities, the levels at which most pupils work are well below the expectations for their ages. In September 2007, the school was awarded the status of a specialist school in the area of sensory impairment.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

St Vincent's is outstanding. Pupils say that they know that their school is excellent and that it is a happy community in which they find friendship. It gives them the expert help and support they need to overcome their disabilities and difficulties. Parents agree that their children enjoy school. They praise the quality of the teaching and the care the school gives. They are delighted with the progress their children make. One parent, typical of many who made their views known, wrote that her daughter's progress is 'astounding'.

Achievement is exemplary. From when they join the school, pupils develop confidence in their own ability to learn and succeed. Whatever their capabilities or starting points, they make excellent progress. Across the age range they reach or exceed the challenging targets set for them. After getting off to a good start in the EYFS, pupils make outstanding progress as they move up through the school. Their achievement in mathematics, information and communication technology skills and English, especially in reading using adapted print or Braille, is exceptional. At Key Stage 4 pupils are very successful in accredited courses. Those in the sixth form build on their success and gain a range of qualifications. There are no evident differences in the achievement of girls or boys. The few pupils from minority ethnic groups do as well as all others.

These exceptional results are brought about by outstanding teaching and learning and excellent care, support and guidance. Teachers are knowledgeable about how best to make the curriculum accessible to pupils who are blind or visually impaired and who in many cases have additional learning difficulties and/or disabilities. They make lessons enjoyable while retaining the rigour necessary to ensure that learning takes place. Classroom teams work together extremely well and pupils never lack for expert help, support or encouragement. Pupils are given the guidance they need to succeed.

The curriculum is exemplary and provides pupils with an exceptionally broad range of learning experiences and opportunities to gain certificates and qualifications. The learning needs and aspirations of individual pupils are met. Personal development is emphasised. Pupils are encouraged to do as much as they can for themselves. Excellent liaison between the school and the boarding provision extends learning opportunities beyond the school day.

Effective measures are taken to keep pupils safe and healthy. The specialised training they are given to develop their mobility and alternative reading and writing methods, primarily Braille, is first rate. The high quality of this work has a positive impact on pupils' learning and progress. Pupils learn to be very independent and are extremely well prepared for life after school.

Pupils' personal development is outstanding. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is excellent. Pupils show through their actions that they respect and care for others. They behave safely. They understand the importance of leading a healthy lifestyle and eat sensibly, taking as much exercise as their mobility will allow. They are happy and unafraid and this helps them to have a positive attitude to learning with high confidence that they will succeed.

The exceptional quality of this school is due to outstanding leadership and management. The excellent features described in the last inspection report in 2005 have been maintained and those that were then good have been raised to a higher standard. The leadership monitors the school very closely and has an accurate view of the quality of what it provides and of the individual progress of each pupil. It has very clear plans to guide its further improvement. Procedures for safeguarding pupils meet current requirements. The leadership is strongly committed to providing equality of opportunity and it promotes community cohesion

exceptionally well. The gaining of specialist school status has contributed to this by raising the profile of St Vincent's in the community. Partnerships with local schools have expanded and become more effective, widening the horizons of pupils. Governors' oversight of the school is good. They know the school well and strongly support it. They scrutinise its performance and contribute to its development planning. Resources are used effectively and efficiently and the school provides outstanding value for money. It is extremely well placed to maintain its exceptional standards and to continue to improve.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

The effectiveness of the sixth form is outstanding. It is much improved since the last inspection. Through the development of excellent links with local schools, colleges and other providers a very wide range of courses and learning opportunities is available for students irrespective of their capabilities. Higher achievers follow A level courses and more specialist qualifications such as the BTEC National Award in physical education and sports leadership. Those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in addition to their visual impairment take entry level courses including the BTEC in work skills, life skills and nutrition. Students' achievement is exceptional. Teaching is of extremely high quality and strongly promotes the personal development and well-being of students. Students are mature, confident and independent. They have a remarkable determination to succeed. They are fully involved in the assessment of their own work and are given excellent guidance about their achievements and what they need to improve. They are very well prepared for life after school. The sixth form is exceptionally well managed and makes very effective use of resources.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

Provision and effectiveness are at least good overall. There are no children in the EYFS at present. However, records show that those who most recently moved up to Key Stage 1 made a good start in the EYFS. Their achievement and personal development were good. Provision for promoting the safety and welfare of children in the EYFS mirrors that throughout the school and is excellent. The rooms available for the youngest children are very child friendly with lots of opportunities and areas for play. There is a teacher trained for the EYFS and the school maintains strong links with a local infant school, which helps to keep practice up to date. The school also buys the services of an local authority early years consultant. Management is good. Good use is made of the school environment to promote outdoor learning. The grounds are extensive and include a sensory garden. The nominated EYFS staff are reflective and forward thinking and ready to take on new ideas. They recognise the importance of spontaneity and play in the development of young children's learning. The ratio of staff to children is maintained at a very good level.

Effectiveness of boarding provision

Grade: 1

The quality of boarding at St Vincent's is outstanding and the school meets all the key National Minimum Standards. All recommendations made at the last inspection have been met and appropriate systems are in place to promote the welfare of young people.

The care provided is outstanding because staff are provided with a high level of training, support and supervision. This enables them to maintain professional practice and review their own

performance. They are strongly motivated and fully committed to meeting the diverse needs of boarders.

Health provision is appropriate. Health plans are in place and those for boarders with complex and more serious health needs are full and detailed. The school is now ensuring that its plans for boarders with few or less evident needs are expanded to include reference to each pupil's medical history, known allergies, any necessary preventive measures and any health monitoring required by staff. All boarders are registered with the surgeries of local general practitioners and have access to a range of health provision that meets their needs exceptionally well. There are very effective and robust systems for the safe handling and storage of medicines. Residential staff are well aware of the individual feelings and opinions of the boarders and innovative in involving them in the development of their own care plans.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Boarders' rights are championed and respected. Their differing individual needs are very well met. Staff take pains to make sure that boarders feel valued and listened to. They consistently encourage them to maintain and form friendships at school. Boarders also have easy access to payphones and e-mail to maintain regular contact with their families. There are extremely effective procedures for promoting positive behaviour. Staff show professional commitment to developing individual, specific and supportive approaches. As a result, standards of behaviour are excellent. Records demonstrate that staff have an excellent understanding of each individual and are consistent and respectful towards them.

Residential staff are extremely positive and proactive in their approach to supporting the education of boarders. Excellent resources are available to help with educational tasks, especially those directed at developing independence, communication and social skills. The school provides a seamless service that promotes attainment and personal achievement exceptionally well.

The school is staffed to meet the individual needs of those staying at any one time. This is achieved by carefully assessing their support needs and taking these into account when staffing levels are being planned. Risk assessments are robust. All staff employed at the school are appropriately vetted. They receive an extensive induction and training programme. This places emphasis on all aspects of safeguarding vulnerable young people. Staff are given training to deal safely with bullying and to respond to complaints and they know to report all concerns.

St Vincent's provides an excellent standard of accommodation. Boarders have a wide range of physical, emotional and learning needs, and some also require specific medical and mobility support. The school is able to cater for and meet all these needs exceptionally well by providing the right equipment and by employing a staff team highly trained to deliver care and support to those with additional needs. The school is safe and is extremely effectively monitored and managed. Leaders ensure that there are detailed environmental and fire risk assessments. All parts of the building to which boarders have access are adapted, and facilities in the school are designed and positioned to ensure that all young people enjoy the full benefits of an inclusive service.

What the school should do to improve further

- All areas for improvement, including those related to social care (boarding), are minor and are already being addressed successfully by the school.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

School records show that achievement is outstanding. Across the age range pupils are keen learners who greatly enjoy their work. Pupils in Key Stage 1 build rapidly on the good start made in the Foundation Stage. Progress is exemplary throughout Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3. Higher attaining pupils, whose starting points are broadly average, achieve exceptionally well. In particular, print and Braille users alike improve their literacy skills significantly, especially reading and comprehension. The gains made by those with the greatest learning difficulties and/or disabilities whose starting points are very low are carefully measured. These pupils also move forward at an exceptional rate. Those in Years 10 and 11 follow externally accredited courses that are very well matched to their capabilities. They make extremely good progress. In 2008 six pupils gained pass grades in GCSE examinations. All achieved at least one A* to G grade and three gained between eight and ten A* to C passes including English and mathematics. Others were successful in a range of entry level and BTEC Level 1 courses. The challenging initial targets for pupils' achievement set when the school gained specialist school status were fully met. Pupils and students in the sixth form acquire skills that will be of great help to them in later life and will support their economic well being.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Pupils enjoy their lessons very much and are very proud of their school. They are very considerate of others. Those with greater mobility and confidence take exemplary care of younger or more vulnerable pupils. At lunchtimes, for example, they can be seen gently leading these pupils from their classroom to the dining room or helping them with their food choice. Attitudes to work are extremely positive and behaviour is excellent. Pupils make it clear in all they do that they share the values of the school community. They know that Britain is a culturally diverse society and they have the utmost respect for the beliefs and customs of others. Attendance is good. Pupils feel safe at school. They trust their teachers and all of the adults who help and look after them. There are many opportunities for pupils to make their views known and they speak up for themselves well. School councillors take their role seriously and feel that their contribution has helped to improve the school. The commitment of older pupils, especially to overcoming the difficulties brought about by their visual impairment and to achieving independence, is exemplary.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

Most teachers are additionally qualified to teach pupils with visual impairment. They know their subjects well. They understand the impact that pupils' visual impairments and additional difficulties and disabilities have on their ability to learn. They are very skilful at adapting their teaching methods to meet individual needs. Many pupils learn best through doing. Their teachers are aware of this and keep pupils active so that they enjoy their lessons, work hard and make excellent progress. Pupils in Key Stage 1 love to learn through music. As their teacher accompanies them on his guitar they sing and dance their number rhymes with infectious enthusiasm. The swift gains they make in numeracy show how effective this is. Classes are very

well managed and individuals get the support they need. Teaching assistants play a vital role in this. Pupils are given clear guidance about how well they are achieving and what they must do in order to improve.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The curriculum matches the needs and aspirations of pupils extremely well. The range of subjects and learning experiences offered is very broad. Pupils are given excellent mobility training and, where appropriate, taught to read Braille and write using a Perkins Braille machine. A few pupils for whom this is necessary are taught to use a tactile symbolic communication system, Moon. Pupils have exceptional opportunities for personal development and chances to work alongside their peers in mainstream schools. Links with local schools are extensive and many pupils attend these for some of their courses. Post -16 learners attend local colleges. The curriculum is much enhanced by local links, such as those with the Liverpool Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and Everton and Liverpool football clubs. The school is also successfully involved in Young Enterprise activities, helping to prepare pupils for their lives beyond school.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

The school gives the highest priority to ensuring the safety and well-being of its pupils. It has a robust policy for child protection that is closely overseen by the governors and reviewed annually. The child protection/safeguarding officer plays a key role in ensuring that looked after children and the most vulnerable receive the help and support that they need. Pupils are strongly involved in assessing their own progress and in setting challenging targets that help them achieve high standards. They are kept well informed about their personal development and academic progress through dialogue with their teachers and the adults who care for and support them. Through excellent mobility training, blind and partially sighted alike are taught to explore their environment confidently and to get about. The excellent liaison between school and residential staff strongly promotes the personal and academic development of boarders. The school's links with other agencies, including Connexions, ensure that older pupils are given excellent guidance to prepare them for work or further study. The school has a liaison officer who works with families and helps to ensure that parents are welcomed as partners in their children's education.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Leadership is exceptional and focused on enabling each pupil to succeed as much as possible. Leaders have effectively managed to raise achievement during challenging circumstances brought about by a significant reduction in the number of pupils and consequent loss of revenue. They have clear plans for future improvement that are well founded on accurate knowledge of the school's strengths and areas for development. Leaders set challenging targets for the school's future development. The successful bid for specialist school status has had a positive impact on pupils' achievement and, through the development of partnerships, on community cohesion. Through careful monitoring the school knows the effectiveness of teaching and learning, the quality of its boarding provision and the progress made by pupils. Management is excellent and leads to the smooth running of a complex establishment. The great majority

of parents are supportive and hold the school in very high regard. Governance is good. Governors are supportive and visit the school regularly. However, they stand ready to hold the leadership to account if necessary.

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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?	1	1
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 effectiveness of boarding provision	1	
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	1

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

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	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 learners' needs?	1	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	1
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?	1	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1	1
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	1	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	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	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**

Thanks to all of you for your help and friendliness when we visited your school. We would particularly like to thank those of you who took the time to have conversations with us. You told us that you are proud of St Vincent's and enjoy your lessons. You particularly like being with your friends. Those of you who are members of the school council told us about the work you do. You are proud of the improvements you have helped to bring about. We were very impressed by the confident way in which you expressed your views. When we asked you about bullying you felt that there was little, if any. You said that pupils feel safe at St Vincent's and that there is always an adult to whom you can turn.

You seemed to enjoy all the lessons we observed. I will not forget the lovely singing and dancing that I heard and saw in the Year 1 mathematics lesson!

As a result of our inspection we found that St Vincent's is an outstanding school. You work very hard and achieve as much as you can. We saw that you are kept as safe as possible, are exceptionally well taught, and are given all the help you need. Your lessons and the things you are given to do are interesting and very varied. You are extremely polite and think of others' needs as well as your own. You are excellently prepared to become independent one day. Your school is led and managed extremely well. We also found that boarding provision is outstandingly good.

We are sure that your headteacher and the staff know what they should do to keep the school as good as it is now and if possible improve it.

Thank you all once more. We wish you every success and happiness for the future.