

St Francis College

Inspection report for Boarding School

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Inspector	Martha Nethaway
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Date of last inspection	26/11/2007

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

St Francis College (the College) is a single sex school for girls situated in the town centre of Letchworth Garden City. It was founded in 1933 and was run by an order of nuns until 1983 when it was taken over by an educational charity. The school offers boarding accommodation to both British and overseas pupils, with the majority of its boarders originating from mainland China and Hong Kong. The majority of boarders are full-time but the College also offer weekly and flexi-boarding. At the time of this inspection there were 47 boarders accommodated and all participated in the inspection process.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

This was an announced inspection undertaken by one Ofsted inspector. The inspection looked at the Boarding School National Minimum Standards under the Every Child Matters outcome groups.

The overall quality of boarding is good. Boarders gain confidence in an environment where they are valued and where caring attitudes are encouraged. Boarders have many opportunities to develop and there is a healthy balance between study, leisure and fun. Boarding life is happy, vibrant and inclusive where achievement in all areas is encouraged and celebrated.

As a result of this visit there is one recommendation being set which relates to the College developing the catering provision for boarders.

Improvements since the last inspection

The College has fully addressed the two recommendations from the previous Ofsted inspection visit. Firstly, the College was recommended to ensure that the College's surgery accurately reflect the medical conditions and emergency interventions as set out in the welfare plans for boarders. This has now been fully addressed because of improved levels of communication between the first-aid co-ordinator and the head of boarding. This is reflected in the records that are maintained for individual boarders which clearly show that the health and welfare of boarders is being protected. Secondly, the College was recommended to review the child protection and safeguarding policy and to ensure it is consistent with the Local Children Safeguarding Board. This has now taken place and there is now a formal process in place to review this policy and guidance annually.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Boarders' health and wellbeing needs are being promoted through effective staff support and policies that are implemented in practice. There is criticism of the food provided. However, there is clear evidence that the College is consulting with boarders to improve the standards and choice in this area. For example, the College food committee includes consultation with boarders.

Young people in the boarding house are fit and well. The College has a number of staff who are qualified first aiders and as a result boarders' medical emergencies can be dealt swiftly and effectively. Boarders' health is additionally protected because the College employs a first-aid coordinator who looks after health matters on a day-to-day basis. In addition, a registered nurse provides treatment for minor ailments during the evening time, twice a week. Added to this, the nurse holds regular discussions on health issues with boarders. The College has clear written policies and procedures for every aspect of handling medicines. Senior boarding staff ensure that all boarding staff handle medicines correctly and that they have the right training and are competent.

The College admission process requires key health and medical histories from parent's be recorded for each boarder including consents for medical and first aid treatments. Boarders are provided with good information and guidance with regard to health and social issues such as, taking regular exercise to keep fit and well. These areas are also addressed formally through the College curriculum and through the pastoral support. A senior manager commented, 'Pastoral care is viewed as an approach to education which endeavours to value and develop each member of the College community. It promotes learning and personal development at every level'.

The dining environment is welcoming and encourages positive social interaction of boarders and staff. The College employs a dedicated catering team who provide menus that are varied and balanced. Special diets, for example being free from dairy, wheat, gluten, egg and nuts, can be catered for by the College. Equally, on religious requirements such as, halal, vegetarian and kosher shows the appropriateness of the College meal provision. Boarders expressed some satisfaction with the food provided but are not always happy with the level of choice and quality of the food provided. The College is addressing this by working in partnership with boarders to raise standards through the student food committee. For example, the College has introduced a healthy brunch on Sundays to replace cooked breakfast and cooked lunch. There are further improvements planned by introducing soup option at lunchtime.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Boarders' safety is promoted because staff listen and take appropriate actions to protect them from harm and abuse. This is underpinned by clear policies and staff procedures that address anti-bullying, child protection and safeguarding, complaints, discipline, health and safety and staff recruitment. One boarder commented, 'This is a safe environment.'

Staff and boarders know that bullying is not tolerated and this is because of the clear procedures implemented in practice. For example, the College makes a clear and regular statement to all pupils that bullying will not be tolerated at College assembly and tutorial group meetings. An occasional questionnaire amongst pupils checks the presence or otherwise of bullying in the College. Boarders' responses from questionnaires universally stated that they are not being bullied in the College environment.

Boarders are protected from abuse. Boarders' protection is promoted through the College's policy and procedures which inform staff on what actions to take regarding concerns about harm or abuse. This means that everyone has a clear understanding of how these responsibilities should be carried out. One boarder summarised, 'We feel secure, are encouraged to talk, and are listened to when we have a worry or concern.' Policies are updated to reflect wider guidance regarding safeguarding measures. The College policies are effectively implemented in practice because the College appropriately follows the correct procedures to refer all child protection and safeguarding matters. The College organises refresher staff training every two years and the designated senior person for child protection has attended advanced training.

Boarders state that the use of discipline within the school is fair and appropriate. This is because the policies on behaviour, discipline, rewards and privileges are very clear and boarders are made fully aware of them. The management of behaviour is based on active encouragement of acceptable behaviour. One boarder mentioned, 'It's about promoting good behaviour, self discipline and respect for others.'

Boarders live in accommodation that provides good physical safety and security. The College has taken clear measures to ensure that boarders' accommodation is reserved for their own use and this is because boarders' accommodation is accessed by electronic key pads. Boarders are protected because the College has a designated health and safety co-ordinator who ensures that all areas of College life are evaluated and risk assessments produced. The College has thorough risk assessments for all aspects of safety which include the premises and grounds and boarders' behaviour and activities. All areas used by boarders are free from avoidable safety hazards and strong efforts ensure that boarders know which areas are out of bounds.

Daily activities are risk assessed good measures are in place to minimise harm to

boarders. Boarders' learn how to protect themselves in an emergency because they regularly practise the emergency escape drills. Safe procedures are in place to protect boarders with tests on the fire systems. Other safety tests include checks on vehicles, water and drainage, gas and electrical testing which take place at the appropriate intervals. The College's environmental risk assessments are good and completed to ensure the College is fully informed about potential hazards and to reduce of risk.

The College operates an established staff vetting procedure which is implemented effectively in practice. Staff involved in recruitment have attended advanced training on safer recruitment which means that the College adopts best practice. This robust recruitment system ensures all staff employed complete the necessary recruitment checks and are deemed suitable to work with children before commencement of employment.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Boarders are clear which member of staff they can go to for personal support. The College provides clear guidance for staff and boarders about how such support is provided and gives each boarder information about this. Boarders have easy access to a range of people at the College. One boarder commented, 'This includes tutors, head of year, head of pastoral care, counsellor, chaplain and an independent listener.' In addition, boarders understand that the boarding staff carry significant pastoral responsibilities to ensure that boarders' welfare is protected at all times. Individual support to boarders is given a high priority by the College. One boarder commented, 'Each boarder is placed in a house when we join and are encouraged to take part in a wide range of inter house activities.' The house system is designed to encourage boarders to mix in wider age and friendship groups as well as promoting friendly competition. Boarders benefit from living in a College where staff are focused on their success, needs and achievements.

The College provides an environment where the value of quality and diversity is understood and promoted. The College environment aims to represent the international and diverse identities of boarders and this uniqueness is celebrated in a way that promotes awareness and understanding. For example, boarders organise events such as the Chinese new year party and a boarders' concert, where they can contribute according to talent and skill. The College has an approach that takes full account of the diverse needs of its boarders and addresses any discrimination based on gender, disability, race, religion, cultural or linguistic background, sexuality or academic or sporting ability. The College makes good arrangements to assist those students with English as an additional language.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The College makes clear efforts in fostering boarders' self-worth through encouraging positive relationships between themselves, their families and the staff at the College. Staff encourage and value boarders' participation in consultation and discussion about the College. For example, house meetings are held regularly and there are suggestion boxes in the common rooms. Boarders' views are regularly sought about the activities programme and they are encouraged to influence and share their views about the range of activities available. The College runs a school council and a boarders' council who help to effectively represent the views of the student population. One member of staff commented, 'Boarders are prepared for community life in a warm and friendly atmosphere.'

Boarders are supported with keeping in touch with their family and friends. The College understands the value and importance of communication and contact with parents. Boarding staff take a positive attitude to boarders' family and parental contact which is viewed as integral to maintain positive family relationships. This is achieved through regular contact via phone calls and emails. Boarders have access to payphones within the boarding house accommodation and also have their own personal mobile phones which they are permitted to use. The boarding house has wireless connection and boarders can maintain contact with family and friends via web based connections. However, boarders commented through the student questionnaires that the wireless connection is not always reliable. Because of this, the College has made significant financial investment and established a hardwire internet connection in the boarding house to address this issue.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The boarding accommodation is sited on the top two floors of the main College building. Some of the boarding accommodation is in the process of being developed and refurbished. Boarders have common rooms, kitchens and access to the library and computer rooms. The boarding common rooms are well equipped and clean with modern furniture. The accommodation provided for boarders is comfortable and well heated and lit. There is a good standard of maintenance and cleanliness because the school employs its own dedicated cleaning, building and maintenance teams. They are proud and loyal to the College and this is reflected in the care taken with the environment.

Boarders' sleeping accommodation is a mix of shared rooms and single rooms and the bedrooms are grouped according to age. Generally, older boarders from Year 11 onwards are allocated the single rooms and this is as a result of consulting with boarders about shared rooms. Rooms are personalised to reflect their own taste, interests and culture. There are an appropriate number of washing facilities for the number of boarders accommodated. Some of the washing facilities have been

upgraded and modernised.

Boarders' possessions and money are adequately protected. The College provides each boarder with a lockable and secure place where they can keep their possessions. There are effective systems for recording pocket money held on behalf of boarders. Boarders know that they can have access to pocket money twice a week.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The leadership and management of the College is good. The College plays a direct role in providing a supportive and motivating environment for boarders. The College places as much importance on character development and growth as achieving academic success for all boarders. One senior manager commented, 'The College is a happy vibrant school where boarders are offered an excellent education well supported by all staff, as well as boarding staff. The girls live in a safe environment where girls of all ages mix and benefit from each other's contribution to our community.'

Boarders are guided through and know what services they can expect from the College. A suitable statement of the school's boarding principles and practice is available to parents, boarders and staff. This means that boarders are well informed about the routines of boarding life.

Boarding at the College is growing and staff are keen to see this develop further in the future. The staffing structure is currently under review and significant changes are being planned in consultation with staff through the governing body for the College. Already this process has begun with two new academic tutors being employed at the College and this will enhance the boarding staff structure further.

The headteacher, is skilled and experienced, provides excellent leadership to the boarders and staff team. The management style includes a collaborative approach which is people-orientated. This means in practice that all staff including teaching and non-teaching take an active interest in the success of boarding as a integral part of the College experience.

Boarders are making good progress because staffing in the College is well organised and effectively managed. Their welfare is effectively monitored with regular weekly discussions by the head of the boarding team. The head of boarding provides all in-house training for all boarding staff and there are clear job descriptions. This training is updated and there is a system for staff appraisal and performance.

The College has a system for monitoring of relevant records, such as complaints, child protection and discipline logs and these areas are reported to the governing body of the College. As a result, there is formal scrutiny that promotes the welfare of boarders. Where shortfalls are identified, these areas are addressed without delay.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The College provides an environment where all boarders are encouraged to participate fully and equally. One staff member commented, 'We aim to create an environment in which girls have a variety of opportunities through which they can learn to be responsible for their education and each other; where they can be fostered, supported in their studies and allowed to participate fully in, and make a significant contribution to, the corporate life of the College.'

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Compliance with national minimum standards

The school meets all the national minimum standards, with the exception of any listed below. To ensure that the school meets the national minimum standards the school needs to...

- ensure the review and development of the College's catering provision continues. (National Minimum Standard 24.2)