

St Robert of Newminster Catholic School and Sixth Form College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	108870
Local authority	Sunderland
Inspection number	377838
Inspection dates	7–8 March 2012
Lead inspector	David Selby

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,586
Of which number on roll in the sixth form	520
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	John Waugh MBE
Headteacher	Jenny Bowen (Acting Headteacher)
Date of previous school inspection	10 May 2007
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Introduction

Inspection team

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Additional inspector
Her Majesty's Inspector
Additional inspector
Additional inspector
Additional inspector

This inspection was carried out with two days' notice. Inspectors observed 62 lessons taught by 61 teachers and visited five morning registration sessions. They held meetings with senior and middle leaders, members of the governing body and groups of students. Inspectors examined documents including the school's self-evaluation and improvement plans, minutes of governing body meetings, records of attendance and behaviour, the bullying and racist incidents logs and the single central record of safeguarding checks. They scrutinised a broad range of students' work through sampling their books and files and in lessons. They considered completed questionnaires from 247 students, 39 members of staff and 166 parents and carers although the on-line questionnaire (Parent View) was not used in planning the inspection because too few responses had been recorded.

Information about the school

St Robert of Newminster Catholic School and Sixth Form College is a larger than average-sized secondary school with a very large sixth form. It has been led by an acting headteacher during this school year. A new headteacher has been appointed and will take up post by September 2012. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is low. The percentage of disabled students and those with special educational needs is low. Few students are from minority ethnic backgrounds or speak English as an additional language. A small number of students attend alternative provision for parts of the week through the school's involvement in the Sunderland Futures 14 to 19 partnership. The school has a specialism in the humanities and is recognised as an Investor in People. It has achieved Healthy School status and Thinking School accreditation. The school exceeds the current floor standard (minimum standards for students' attainment and progress). As this is a faith school, its religious character will be subject to a separate inspection.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory and 4 is inadequate
Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall Effectiveness	2
Achievement of pupils	2
Quality of teaching	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils	1
Leadership and management	2

Key Findings

- St Robert’s is a good school. Achievement is strong overall and school leaders ensure that resolute action is taken to improve any weaker areas. The quality of teaching, support and outcomes mean that the sixth form is good. Behaviour is outstanding. Much teaching is good or better, but the remaining satisfactory teaching limits the rate of some students’ progress in lessons. The school is not outstanding because teaching, while good overall, is inconsistent.
- Inspectors observed students making good progress in lessons. They attain academic standards which are well above the national average. Students achieve particularly well in English and mathematics, although there are a few weaker subjects, including science. Actions taken by leaders have started to reduce this variability.
- Teaching is good. There are examples of satisfactory and less frequently outstanding practice. Teachers’ planning is usually effective but does not always take account of students’ prior learning and marking is not helpful consistently. There are strategies for ensuring students develop literacy skills to support their wider learning but these are not in place fully.
- The behaviour of students around the school is exemplary. They are courteous, considerate and cooperate well moving between lessons and in their social time. Racial abuse and incidents of bullying are extremely rare. Behaviour is usually good in lessons. Attendance of all groups of students is well above the national average and continues to rise steadily.
- School leaders have worked together and supported the acting headteacher well to ensure the school continues to improve. The curriculum provides good opportunities for all students.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the way all teachers use assessment by:
 - ensuring that they always plan activities in lessons which meet the learning needs of differing groups of students fully
 - ensuring that students' work is marked to a consistently high standard, providing frequent, detailed and accurate feedback which allows students to understand how to improve their work and checking how students respond.
- Ensure that students' literacy skills are supported and improved across the curriculum by implementing the school's literacy policy fully.

Main Report

Achievement of pupils

Most students enter the school with attainment which is above the national average, they make good progress overall and gain GCSE results which are well above average in most subjects. Attainment has improved over the last three years. Progress in English and mathematics is particularly strong, leading to high attainment. Students' progress in the different science courses is not consistent but is improving as a result of changes to management strategies and improved teaching. There is little variation in the progress of the different groups represented in the school. Disabled students and those with special educational needs make more progress than the similar group nationally. Inspection evidence supports the view of school leaders that the progress of Year 13 is increasing to match the good progress of Year 12.

Ofsted questionnaires and discussions with students indicate that they feel they learn a lot in lessons and are helped to achieve well. Inspection findings support this. Students comment that they learn most when they have to think for themselves and are given opportunities to assess their own and other's work. Conversely, their motivation and progress is not as good on the rare occasions when tasks are too hard or too easy or they do not receive good feedback on how they are doing. Students have good social and organisational skills and enjoy working independently. They communicate well, speak confidently and use information and communication technology effectively. Their writing is often detailed but some students do not present their work with sufficient care and not enough attention is paid to correcting basic errors.

Although the number of responses to the Ofsted questionnaire was relatively small, the vast majority of parents or carers who responded were happy with the education provided and were right to feel that children make good progress.

Quality of teaching

There are very positive relationships between teachers and students which support good learning. Students respond well to teachers' instructions and requests. In many lessons, there is good development of skills, knowledge and understanding because teachers ask challenging questions. Time is provided for reflection and to allow students to explain their ideas. This allows teachers assess students' level of understanding and plan to meet their needs. Where questioning is less strong, it only requires simple responses and does not encourage all students to participate. While outstanding teaching in some sixth form lessons encourages students to learn independently, in a few classes they can become passive when they are not challenged to think enough. The best teaching follows careful planning where teachers have considered information on students' prior attainment and aptitudes. This ensures lessons are fast paced and engaging for all students. This was the case in a Year 10 English lesson where students extended their moral and cultural skills through their analysis of challenging African poetry. Teaching assistants contribute significantly to the learning of disabled students and those with special educational needs.

While formal assessments are marked thoroughly, the quality of routine marking is not consistent. Some teachers provide detailed feedback which models good practice and lets students understand what they need to do to improve. On other occasions, teachers acknowledge that work has been completed but little else. Teachers do not always check that students respond to marking comments and complete corrections to their work. The school has started to develop literacy skills in all subjects and this enhances learning in some classes. In a Year 7 class, a well-planned literacy based task gave a good start to history learning, however, this type of approach is not common in all lessons. Not all teachers insist on high standards of presentation and errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar are sometimes not identified.

The responses from the students' and parents' and carers' questionnaires both show very high levels of satisfaction with teaching in the school.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students are polite, friendly and sensible. Their respect for teachers and each other and their positive attitudes to learning demonstrate the values and ethos of the school. Students know what is expected of them and understand and conform to the school's systems. They are calm and orderly when moving around the school without the need for intervention from members of staff. Students support others' learning through their good social behaviour in lessons. Some teachers do not always plan to develop students' creativity and independent learning skills.

Incidents of bullying and racism are extremely rare. In every case there is prompt and decisive action from the school. Students are aware of the different forms of bullying and are active in preventing bullying with student 'anti-bullying mentors' in each year. They say they feel safe in school and are taught how to be safe in practical subjects and personal, social and health education classes. They are confident who to talk to should the need arise.

Attendance is well above average and increasing. Very few students are persistently absent. These reflect students' commitment to school and systematic and active

work with parents and carers. Punctuality to school and lessons is good. Rates of exclusion from school are significantly below the national average.

Almost all questionnaire responses from students, parents and carers agree that behaviour at the school is good. A few parents commented that lessons are sometimes disturbed by poor behaviour. Inspectors took particular note of this in scrutinising behaviour records, observing lessons and speaking with students. They found that poor behaviour is very rare in lessons and when it occurs it is managed well by staff.

Leadership and management

The acting headteacher provides resolute but principled leadership. She is supported effectively by senior leaders who share a common vision and are equally committed to securing further improvement in the school. Staff identify that the school's progress has not been reduced during the medium-term leadership arrangements. Identified weaknesses in areas of middle leadership have been tackled although this has led to a number of new members of staff and staff in new roles this year. The school has supported these new leaders well and can identify their impact already on student outcomes. Staff development is linked to the school's performance management system which involves all staff in contributing to the school improvement aims. The governing body provides strong support and targeted challenge. Individual governors are linked to key areas of the school, including those where performance has been identified as less strong. The governing body has wide experience and commitment to training, for example, in ensuring that there is good understanding of safeguarding young people. This contributes to the school's strong safeguarding arrangements which meet government requirements.

The well-developed quality assurance procedures allow leaders to judge the quality of teaching and learning. Inspectors found that the school's grading of teaching quality was sometimes generous although joint observations with an inspector showed a close match when evaluating strengths in teaching and learning. Subject leaders are expected to link information on teaching quality to students' results. Where this highlights underperformance, appropriate action is taken. The school has a well-structured development plan, which identifies appropriate priorities, although these are not linked firmly to the school's current self-evaluation document.

The curriculum is matched closely to the needs of students and extended through the strength of the school's partnerships. The school operates a transition week which gives Year 6 students an opportunity to experience learning in their new school before they arrive in Year 7. Students say that this helps them make a swift and confident start. Further options are now being offered in the sixth form with the addition of an International Baccalaureate Diploma programme. The development of students' strong spiritual, moral, social and cultural skills and understanding is encouraged by the range of experiences offered across the school and planned for in lessons. The humanities specialism adds to this in, for example, the school's activities centred around Holocaust Memorial Day. The richness of the curriculum contributes to all students who leave the school remaining in education or taking up training or employment.

The school's policies and procedures promote equality of opportunity. Sensitive support is provided to enable disabled students and those with special educational needs to engage in all the school has to offer and ensure they achieve well. Achievement has risen and the sixth form has improved since the previous inspection demonstrating the school's good capacity to improve further.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	46	46	8	0
Primary schools	8	47	40	5
Secondary schools	14	38	40	8
Special schools	28	48	20	4
Pupil referral units	15	50	29	5
All schools	11	46	38	6

New school inspection arrangements have been introduced from 1 January 2012. This means that inspectors make judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2010 to 31 August 2011 and represent judgements that were made under the school inspection arrangements that were introduced on 1 September 2009. These data are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Primary schools include primary academy converters. Secondary schools include secondary academy converters, sponsor-led academies and city technology colleges. Special schools include special academy converters and non-maintained special schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning and development taking account of their attainment.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Behaviour	how well pupils behave in lessons, with emphasis on their attitude to learning. Pupils' punctuality to lessons and their conduct around the school.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving based on its self-evaluation and what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the governors and headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.
Safety	how safe pupils are in school, including in lessons; and their understanding of risks. Pupils' freedom from bullying and harassment. How well the school promotes safety, for example e-learning.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



9 March 2012

Dear Students

Inspection of St Robert of Newminster Catholic School and Sixth Form College, Washington, NE38 8AF

Thank you for the help you gave to the inspection team when we visited your school recently. Particular thanks go to those who gave up their time to speak to inspectors and those of you who completed questionnaires. Your views helped us build our picture of your school.

The inspectors judged St Robert's to be a good school. We think you are right to be proud of it. We were very pleased to observe your mature behaviour, the way you work to help each other learn and the positive relationships you have with your teachers and visitors. Almost all of you make good progress and achieve well. Achievement in the school has risen over the last three years. We agree that you receive a good quality of teaching and that the school offers you a wide range of learning experiences.

The acting headteacher, governors and senior leaders are determined to make the school even better and know what is needed to make this happen. We have asked your teachers to make sure they assess your work in ways which let them plan lessons so that each of you can be given work that will stretch you. Some of your teachers mark your work in more detail and give you better information on what you need to do to improve it, so we recommend all teachers do this. We also found that your literacy skills are not being built on in the same way in all your subjects; we would like all teachers to follow the school's literacy policy to make sure this happens. You have an important part to play by making sure you do what your teachers ask you when they mark your work and by trying hard to present your work as well as you can. We are sure you will work hard to do this.

On behalf of all the inspectors, I wish you every success in the future.

Yours sincerely

David Selby
Lead inspector

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