

St Bernard's Catholic School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110516
Local Authority	Buckinghamshire
Inspection number	356767
Inspection dates	29–30 September 2010
Reporting inspector	Ian Hodgkinson

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	674
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	88
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Maggi Bull
Headteacher	Robert Simpson
Date of previous school inspection	10 October 2007
School address	Daws Hill Lane High Wycombe HP11 1PW
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three additional inspectors. Inspectors observed 25 teachers and 27 lessons, and dropped in briefly on other lessons and activities. Discussions were held with senior and middle leaders, staff, members of the governing body and students, and a representative from the Community Cohesion and Black African/Caribbean Mentoring Projects. Inspectors looked at documentation, including students' books, the school development plan, records of assessment and tracking of students' progress, plans and monitoring information for the support of vulnerable students, records of the school's arrangements for the safeguarding and protection of students, and policies and procedures for promoting equality and countering discrimination. In addition, inspectors considered 110 parental and carer questionnaire responses, and those from staff and students.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- The efficiency and effectiveness of the sixth form.
- The effectiveness of leadership and management at all levels in driving up attainment and in reducing in-school variation between the examination results of different subjects.
- How well teachers match work to the needs of all groups of students in their classes, to ensure that all students learn well.

Information about the school

This small school is the only Catholic secondary school in Buckinghamshire, and draws its students widely from across the county. It has a small sixth form. The county operates a system of selective grammar schools and non-selective secondary schools, and St Bernard's does not select on grounds of academic ability. The proportion of students known to be eligible for a free school meal is low, and the proportion with special educational needs and/or disabilities, chiefly with specific or moderate learning difficulties, is below average. The proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is above average and has risen steadily in recent years, with a particular increase in the number of students of Eastern European, particularly Polish, heritage. A high proportion of students speak English as an additional language, and 19 of these are at an early stage of learning the language. Mobility into the school after the usual time of admission in Year 7 is high.

The school received specialist designation for science in 2008. It has also achieved Healthy School accreditation, and the Sports Mark and Activemark awards. It achieved the 'Investors in Families' accreditation in July 2010.

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: how good is the school?

2

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

St Bernard's is a good school, where students' attainment by Year 11 has risen strongly since the previous inspection, and is now above average. Students' good learning is underpinned by the strong ethos of support and mutual respect, which permeates the school community. As a consequence, students work very effectively together, and readily support each other in improving each other's performance. Within a welcoming and encouraging environment, students, including those who speak English as an additional language, contribute their views clearly and confidently in lessons. They make an excellent contribution to the school and wider community, by readily taking on leadership roles and other responsibilities, and by playing an active part in consultations on improvements to the provision made by the school. Students from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds mix easily and work together constructively. Good, courteous behaviour in lessons and around the school site ensures that students feel safe and helps them to concentrate on learning. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding.

Teachers have generally become adept at grouping students very effectively to work on tasks which are well suited to their capabilities. They encourage students to assess their own work and that of others against clear criteria, so that students develop a keen sense of how performance can be improved. Work is generally marked assiduously, and, importantly, students respond to their teachers' comments. A good curriculum is becoming increasingly well tailored to suit the interests and aspirations of students. The specialist science designation has broadened science provision in the school and supported significant improvements in attainment, in science and particularly in mathematics. A wide range of extra-curricular and enrichment activities promote students' enjoyment of school and their active and healthy lifestyles. The school has developed excellent links with partner institutions and agencies to support its most vulnerable students. It has established outstanding methods for helping parents and carers support their children's learning, including, for example, through language support for Polish parents. As a result of good care, guidance and support, all groups of students make good progress up to Year 11.

The senior leadership team initiated a radical review of the small sixth form in 2009 as a result of significant weaknesses in students' attainment and progress at A level. As a consequence of actions taken to revise the curriculum and strengthen the monitoring of students' progress, the progress of sixth formers is now satisfactory. However, the school recognises that inconsistencies remain in the quality of teaching and learning between sixth form subjects, and that monitoring of provision in the sixth form has not been as strong as in other parts of the school.

The overall strong improvement since the last inspection has been given exceptionally clear direction by the headteacher. He has been highly successful in building a cohesive

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school community which is true to its mission and ethos while being firmly focused on raising achievement. School improvement planning is based on comprehensive self-evaluation at all levels, so that school leaders, staff and the governing body all clearly recognise the school's strengths, and where it needs to improve. As attainment has risen, gaps between the performance of different subjects at GCSE have closed in most cases, although GCSE results in design and technology subjects remain relatively weak. The very strong track record of improvement in most areas of the school, including significant improvements in students' attainment and attendance, all confirm that the school has a good capacity to improve further.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the progress of students in the sixth form, by:
 - securing greater consistency in the quality of teaching and learning between subjects
 - improving leadership and management of the sixth form through regular monitoring of teaching and learning, and by holding subjects rigorously to account for their performance
- Close the few remaining gaps in attainment between subjects at GCSE, by:
 - raising attainment and improving progress in design and technology subjects
 - improving further the capacity of subject leaders to evaluate and develop the quality of teaching and learning in their subjects.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

2

The attainment of students when they join the school in Year 7 is changing over time. For those in Key Stage 3, attainment on entry matches fairly closely the national picture. For those in Key Stage 4 and the year groups that went before them, there were relatively few higher attainers when they joined, indicating a lower than average profile. Students therefore achieve well when attaining examination results at Year 11 which are above the national average. In English students make particularly good progress to consistently attain GCSE results which are above average overall and at the higher grades. In English lessons students typically engage in very mature analysis of language and texts. They participate fully in well-constructed group tasks, and respond thoughtfully to the searching, probing questioning directed to them by their teachers. Teachers' expectations are high and students respond well. Provisional GCSE results for 2010 show mathematics performance to have strengthened markedly to above last year's national average at grades A*?C. Mathematics lessons generally move ahead at a strong pace, and teachers use a variety of methods to ensure that students grasp the concepts. For example, in one outstanding mathematics lesson in Year 7 on negative numbers, students were brimming with enthusiasm as they contributed quick-fire answers to questions on the interactive whiteboard, joined in the 'human number line' and reinforced their learning in paired work with their partners. The improvement of attainment in mathematics is a key marker of success in the school's efforts to close gaps in attainment between subjects, although a few gaps remain

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Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities make good progress. Mostly, work is adapted suitably to meet their needs and promotes their full engagement in learning. In-class support by teaching assistants offers guidance and encouragement without stifling students' independence.

Very considerable improvements in students' overall attendance and a very low rate of persistent absence offer testament to students' enjoyment of school. Students get fully involved in the wide range of activities on offer, taking their role in charitable work very seriously. They make their voices heard in a wide range of forums, including the school council and focus groups which examine many aspects of the school's provision. The good development of students' basic skills of literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT), together with their highly developed skills for working collaboratively, ensure that they are well prepared for the world of work or further education.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	2
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	2
Pupils' behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

How effective is the provision?

In the large majority of lessons, teachers plan work very effectively to ensure that all groups of students in their classes are suitably challenged and supported. This, together with close monitoring of students' progress, ensures that most stay on track to meet or exceed their challenging targets. Most teachers have high expectations for their students, but in the few subjects where this is not the case, students' attainment lags behind.

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Teachers set homework regularly and mark it helpfully with comments detailing how students can improve their work. Where practice is most effective, for example in English, teachers ensure that students respond to their written comments, for example by creating their own, explicit targets for improvement out of the teachers' comments, and by insisting that students finish off any incomplete work. Teachers' questioning is often well directed to draw all students into discussion, and well pitched to challenge students to develop their thoughts and ideas. As a result, students, including those who speak English as an additional language, develop confidence in articulating their views and using subject-specific language.

Throughout the curriculum teachers are successful in planning to develop students' capacity for independent learning. In spite of the school's relatively small size, the curriculum has broadened since the previous inspection to offer a wider range of vocational and applied courses in Years 9, 10 and 11, and success rates in vocational business and ICT courses are particularly high. The school's specialist designation has significantly broadened the range of science courses available to students at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form, and most of the specialist targets for science and mathematics have been met or exceeded.

Care and support for those students who are vulnerable, those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, and those who speak English as an additional language, are highly effective. The school draws widely on external agencies to help those with specific needs. It offers a range of support services to parents and students of Polish heritage who are at an early stage of learning English, to enable the students to settle in quickly and help their parents and carers to support their learning. Transition arrangements for those arriving in Year 7 from a large number of primary schools are good and students settle in well. In the past, guidance offered to students about post-16 options was not effective enough to ensure that they took sixth form courses best suited to their capabilities and interests, so that too many did not succeed at A level. Substantial changes to the sixth form curriculum and close collaboration with local partner schools have addressed this shortcoming, so that students now have a broader choice and clear counselling on the best options available.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	2
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	2

How effective are leadership and management?

The clear vision and highly effective leadership of the headteacher have successfully ensured that the whole-school community is focused on continuous improvement. Thorough self-evaluation has led the governing body to improve its effectiveness, by

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developing the expertise of its key committees and improving its methods for getting governors into school and engaging with staff and departments. The governing body is therefore well informed and fully able to hold the school's leaders to account for performance. The school's leaders initiated a thorough and far-reaching review of the sixth form in 2009 in response to its poor performance. The extensive changes introduced as a result of this review have led to improving attainment and satisfactory progress for the current sixth form students.

Procedures to safeguard the well-being of students are comprehensive and all regulations are fully met. The school carefully monitors the progress and welfare of all groups of students to secure equality of opportunity and counter discrimination. For example, in response to data showing some weaker progress for Black African and Caribbean students, it established a successful mentoring project to engage with students and their parents and carers, which has become a model for other schools locally. The school is highly involved in projects to develop community cohesion locally, and has a clear strategy to further develop its links and engagement with partners nationally and internationally to broaden and deepen students' already well-developed appreciation of cultural diversity.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	2
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	2
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

Sixth form

Historically, significant numbers of students, including many with higher GCSE results, have left the school at the end of Year 11 to continue their education in selective schools or sixth form colleges. As a consequence, the attainment of those beginning courses in St Bernard's sixth form has generally been lower than that found in most sixth forms. Prior to a major review in 2009, the sixth form offered a relatively narrow range of mainly academic subjects, and students' A level attainment was low and declined over time. Retention rates were also low, and a high proportion stayed only in Year 12. As a result of

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the sixth form review, the curriculum has been radically reshaped. There is now a more extensive range of vocational and applied courses at level 2 and level 3, and a small number of sixth formers attend partner schools in the local post-16 consortium for part of their week to take some of their academic A level lessons. As a result of this more comprehensive offer, shaped partly by consultation with students themselves, entry into Year 12 this year has almost doubled. Students' learning and progress is satisfactory, with the large majority of Year 13 students broadly on course to attain results expected given their GCSE scores. In lessons students apply themselves diligently, and articulate their views with confidence. Teachers mostly have appropriate expectations for their students' learning. However, progress is less effective in classes where the challenge is too high for lower-attainers in the group, or where the challenge is too low and not rigorous enough to meet the demands of the course.

Leadership and management of the sixth form have strengthened, so that students' progress is now rigorously tracked and support is put in place to prevent underachievement. Monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning, however, has not been as rigorous in the sixth form as in other parts of the school. Students feel well supported by their teachers, although some would like a more comprehensive induction into Year 12 to be sure about the course structure before they start. Students enjoy their time in the sixth form, and continue to develop very good personal qualities as they play a full, active and supportive role in the work of the school and the wider community.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	3
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	3
The quality of provision in the sixth form	3
Leadership and management of the sixth form	3

Views of parents and carers

Parents and carers have a largely very favourable view of the school. A number of parents and carers of students new to Year 7 wrote to say how well their children had settled in as a result of the welcome they had received. One parent or carer summed up the views of a number of others in saying: 'I would like to mention the strong pastoral care at the school which runs alongside its ethos.' A few parents and carers commented on the variability of teaching quality, and inspectors found that while teaching was good overall, a small amount of variation did exist.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at St Bernard's Catholic School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 110 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 674 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	45	41	61	55	2	2	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	47	43	62	56	0	0	0	0
My school informs me about my child's progress	31	28	63	57	8	7	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	31	28	60	55	8	7	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	35	32	59	54	4	4	2	2
The school helps me to support my child's learning	27	25	57	52	11	10	1	1
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	24	22	69	63	14	13	0	0
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	28	25	66	60	2	2	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	30	27	61	55	10	9	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	29	27	61	56	8	7	1	1
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	16	15	65	60	12	11	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	36	33	65	59	2	2	1	1
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	52	47	50	45	4	4	0	0

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

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	58	36	4	2
Primary schools	8	43	40	9
Secondary schools	10	35	42	13
Sixth forms	13	39	45	3
Special schools	33	42	20	4
Pupil referral units	18	40	29	12
All schools	11	42	38	9

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2009 to 31 March 2010 and are the most recently published data available (see www.ofsted.gov.uk). Please note that the sample of schools inspected during the autumn and spring terms 2009/10 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on 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 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:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
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.

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.



Dear Students

Inspection of St Bernard's Catholic School, High Wycombe, HP11 1PW

Many thanks for the welcome you gave to me and my colleagues when we visited the school for its recent inspection. The courtesy you show to visitors and to each other in lessons and around the school site is a very strong feature of your school. It helps you to feel safe, and to learn well by supporting each other in lessons.

You attend a good school. You achieve well to gain GCSE results which are above average and which have been improving year-on-year. Teachers generally plan lessons which take account of the range of abilities of students in their class, and use a variety of methods to make learning interesting. They help you to understand how to improve, partly by encouraging you to assess your own work and that of others. You are given a good choice of courses to study, and plenty of opportunities to get involved in activities outside the classroom. The extent to which you take on leadership roles and make your voice heard in shaping the direction of the school is outstanding.

The headteacher gives the school very clear direction. School leaders have been successful in developing the school's supportive and caring ethos while promoting general improvements in attainment. They have established some excellent partnerships with parents, carers, other schools and other agencies to support your learning and well-being. The sixth form went through a difficult period, but a far-reaching review and reshaping of its provision means that it is now offering a satisfactory quality of education.

In order to improve still further, the school should focus on the following matters.

- Improve the progress of students in the sixth form.
- Raise attainment in the few remaining subjects where students' performance is significantly lower than their attainment in other subjects.

I wish you every success for the future.

Yours sincerely

Ian Hodgkinson

Her Majesty's Inspector

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