

St Thomas Aquinas Catholic School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	103533
Local Authority	Birmingham
Inspection number	376924
Inspection dates	27–28 September 2011
Reporting inspector	Robert Barbour HMI

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	1242
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	210
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Laurence Docherty
Headteacher	Jim Foley
Date of previous school inspection	25 April 2007
School address	Wychall Lane Kings Norton Birmingham B38 8AP
Telephone number	0121 464 4643
Fax number	0121 464 4043
Email address	enquiry@stacs.bham.sch.uk

Age group	11–18
Inspection date(s)	27–28 September 2011
Inspection number	376924

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, work-based learning and skills training, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

Further copies of this report are obtainable from the school. Under the Education Act 2005, the school must provide a copy of this report free of charge to certain categories of people. A charge not exceeding the full cost of reproduction may be made for any other copies supplied.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 4234, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may copy all or parts of this document for non-commercial educational purposes, as long as you give details of the source and date of publication and do not alter the information in any way.

To receive regular email alerts about new publications, including survey reports and school inspection reports, please visit our website and go to 'Subscribe'.

Piccadilly Gate
Store St
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 4234
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

© Crown copyright 2011



Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four additional inspectors. Inspectors observed 37 lessons, taught by 37 different teachers. Meetings were held with students, staff, governors and representatives of the partner organisations with which the school works. Inspectors observed the school's work, and looked at a range of documentation including governing body minutes; school planning and self-evaluation; 470 questionnaires submitted by parents and carers; and questionnaires completed by students and staff.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- Is the sixth form now outstanding, especially in the light of its partnership arrangements?
- To what extent do students take an active role in lessons?
- How well is the impact of teaching on learning monitored?
- How well does the school foster the engagement of potentially disaffected students?
- How well are the vertical tutor groups contributing to the care, guidance and support provided by the school?

Information about the school

St Thomas Aquinas Catholic School is an above averaged-sized secondary school. A large majority of students are from White British or White Irish backgrounds with the rest from a range of minority ethnic backgrounds. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is above average. The proportion of students with special educational needs is average, as is the proportion with a statement of special educational need. The school has an inclusion unit called the Manion Centre which supports vulnerable students. The school is a specialist college for mathematics and computing, and in 2007 achieved the National Association for Able Children in Education award for provision for gifted and talented students.

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?

1

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

1

Main findings

St Thomas Aquinas Catholic School is an outstanding school. The headteacher and the senior team lead the school outstandingly well. Since the last inspection, they have introduced a range of important strategic developments which have led to the school making a step change in its effectiveness. These carefully planned and highly effective developments, coupled with the very high quality self-evaluation and planning, mean that the school's capacity for sustained improvement is outstanding. One of the school's partners described the school as, 'A school that is innovative for the benefit of its students, is totally committed and is always seeking to improve.'

At the heart of the school is a very strong ethos for the full and rounded development of every student. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students is outstanding and is at the very heart of the school's purpose. The care, guidance and support the school provides are outstanding. The vertical tutoring system, although relatively new, is now embedded and has shown itself to be highly effective. Tutors monitor the progress and welfare of each student very well. In particular the needs of the most vulnerable or potentially disaffected students are met highly effectively. Students feel outstandingly safe, their behaviour is outstanding and their attendance is high. Students take an active role in the development of the school, and take on responsibility in their tutor groups when still quite early in their school career. Their contribution to the school and the wider community is outstanding. The school also engages outstandingly well with parents and carers, and a regular forum for parents and carers is particularly effective.

In the past, the achievement of some students was limited by a curriculum which did not fully meet the interests and needs of all. The curriculum has been radically overhauled and is now outstanding. As a result, students are now making good progress in their lessons. A most impressive and longer-standing feature is the programme of annual residential visits that every student takes part in each year. Their experiences on these visits contribute to their outstanding workplace and other skills that, in turn, contribute to their economic well-being. The school's specialist status has made a material contribution to standards in mathematics, and to programmes to foster family numeracy.

School leaders are active partners in an outstandingly successful range of partnerships that are having a major effect on the welfare of students. The links with the local police are innovative and, together with the highly effective links to other agencies and the school's own internal systems, result in safeguarding being

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

outstanding. School leaders are outstandingly effective in promoting community cohesion and also in their promotion of equal opportunity and tackling discrimination.

The sixth form is good and is improving rapidly due to the outstanding leadership and management and the very close partnerships with other schools.

The leadership and management of teaching and learning are outstanding with excellent internal review of faculties and high quality programmes to develop the quality of teaching. The quality of teaching is currently good, and the proportion of outstanding teaching is growing. In the outstanding teaching, students experience rich and challenging tasks that fully engage their interest and develop their understanding. In those classes where teaching is satisfactory, teachers explain concepts clearly and plan activities for students, but these are sometimes at too low a level.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the proportion of outstanding teaching by ensuring that more lessons contain rich and challenging tasks that engage students' interest and develop their understanding.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

1

Students enter the school with attainment that is broadly average. The more limited nature of the curriculum in the past meant that, while they made good progress in some subjects, the attainment of students across all their subjects was close to the national average in Year 11. Currently, however, students are making good progress because the curriculum is now very well suited to their needs and aspirations. In an outstanding Year 7 religious education lesson, students shared ideas in pairs and small groups on the nature of cultural identity and related this to a story in the gospels. They worked with real enthusiasm, and this contributed to their learning. In an outstanding Year 11 geography lesson, students assessed each other's work on forests at a deep level. As a result, the students were able to change their work to more fully meet assessment requirements. In both classes, the behaviour and positive attitudes of students actively supported their learning. Even in lessons where the teaching was less engaging, the positive behaviour of students still made a material contribution to their progress.

Students with special educational needs also make good progress due to the high quality of support that they receive. School records of progress show that where differences have been apparent in the progress of different groups, these are closing fast.

Students gain good basic skills, as evident in an information and communication technology (ICT) lesson in Year 11. They experience enterprise days and other

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

opportunities to develop team working skills. These make an important contribution, along with their high attendance, to the outstanding development of their workplace skills. Students are active in helping to plan developments in school, such as the vertical tutoring system. In addition, they collect very actively for charities, keenly take up opportunities to volunteer as sports coaches in primary schools and distribute Christmas hampers in the local community.

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	3
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	1
Pupils' behaviour	1
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	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	1
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

How effective is the provision?

'It's the supportive atmosphere and the relationships that make this school special', were the words of one student, and they sum up the excellence of the provision for care, guidance and support. This extends from the close monitoring of the progress of every student through to the detailed liaison with external agencies to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and potentially disaffected students. The Manion Centre unit has made a significant contribution in supporting individual students to modify their behaviour. Its impact is warmly appreciated by other schools who have made extensive use of it to give their own students a fresh start. Programmes to improve attendance have been highly effective. Transition arrangements for students into the school in Year 7 and again into post-16 and then into higher education are exemplary.

The curriculum now meets students' needs and aspirations outstandingly well. A substantial selection of vocational courses is available. In addition, the school is very well placed to meet new developments. The wide provision of residential courses and

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

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

extra-curricular activity is a key reason for the way the students develop their outstandingly wide range of skills.

Teaching is good. Teachers have a good relationship with their classes, good subject knowledge and explain concepts clearly. When they ask questions, they follow a policy of 'no hands up' so that all students have to think through the question for themselves, as any student may be asked to answer the question. Students have a good understanding of their progress, and of the standard of work required to achieve a particular grade. All teachers have acted to make sure that their initial input to a lesson is not too long and to engage students in the lesson. In the increasing proportion of outstanding teaching this student activity is rich, deep and engages students' interest very well.

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	1
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

The headteacher and his senior team have a very clear vision of a full, rounded and high quality education, and this ethos permeates the school. They have introduced substantial change to both the pastoral and academic aspects of the school. This change has been planned with very great care, so that changes made since the last inspection are already well embedded. In the management of teaching and learning, the reviews of academic faculties are of very high quality. They contain observations and evaluation of great insight, and are backed up with rigorous plans for improvement. Increasingly, the school is developing systems of external challenge with its partner schools. These factors combined mean that the total quality of education provided by the school is high and still improving.

The governing body fulfils its role effectively and holds the leadership of the school to account. Governors know the school well and receive regular reports on its performance. The school has carefully audited the community it serves. School leaders and managers place a high priority on their plans for promoting community cohesion. The school's exceptionally strong links with the police and other agencies have worked to suppress anti-social behaviour in the community and have been highly effective in supporting the safeguarding of students. Support for black students has been encouraged through employment of black mentors to act as role models. Such action, and the narrowing gaps in performance between different groups, is evidence of the school's outstanding work to promote equality of opportunity. All aspects of safeguarding are exemplary.

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

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	1
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	1
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	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	1
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

Sixth form

The leadership team for the sixth form is relatively new in post, but has already shown itself to be outstandingly effective. The sixth form has improved rapidly and this improvement continues.

Students in the sixth form have very good opportunities to contribute to the school, for example as house captains. They appreciate the support and advice that they receive on entry to the sixth form and as they plan for their future education and careers. They make good progress and achieve their aspirations for higher education or other destinations. All the leavers from Year 13 last summer are in higher education, employment or training and a large majority are in higher education. The partnership with other schools means that a very wide range of options is available to students, and this partnership also acts to ensure that the high quality of provision is maintained.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	2
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	2
The quality of provision in the sixth form	2
Leadership and management of the sixth form	1

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

Views of parents and carers

There was far higher than the normal rate of response to the questionnaire. Parents and carers expressed strong support for the school, and particularly large numbers said that their children are safe at school and enjoy school. There were some written comments; there was a mixture of positive and negative comments, but no pattern to the small number of negative comments that were made.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at St Thomas Aquinas 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 470 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1242 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	193	41	261	56	9	2	6	1
The school keeps my child safe	210	45	243	52	12	3	0	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	190	41	249	53	17	4	4	1
My child is making enough progress at this school	170	36	257	55	28	6	4	1
The teaching is good at this school	172	37	278	59	11	2	4	1
The school helps me to support my child's learning	157	33	268	57	28	6	4	1
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	116	25	289	62	53	11	3	1
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)	156	33	257	55	27	6	5	1
The school meets my child's particular needs	148	32	284	61	18	4	6	1
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	166	35	245	52	29	6	12	3
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	126	27	269	57	40	9	5	1
The school is led and managed effectively	187	40	257	55	11	2	5	1
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	204	43	239	51	19	4	4	1

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	43	47	10	0
Primary schools	6	46	42	6
Secondary schools	14	36	41	9
Sixth forms	15	42	41	3
Special schools	30	48	19	3
Pupil referral units	14	50	31	5
All schools	10	44	39	6

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 2010 to 08 April 2011 and 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.

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

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

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.



29 September 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of St Thomas Aquinas Catholic School, Birmingham, B38 8AP

Thank you for your help and for taking time to talk to us during the recent inspection. I am writing to tell you about our main findings.

Yours is an outstanding school. You are exceptionally well cared for, and overwhelmingly you told us that you feel safe in school. You receive a wide range of experiences in your lessons, in other activities and also particularly in the residential visits that you experience each year. As a result, you are gaining a wide range of skills which are preparing you exceptionally well for the future. At the same time, you are developing into mature and aware citizens. Your high standards of behaviour and attendance are further testimony to this.

You are taught well, and you have good opportunities to take part in lessons. We have recommended to the school that your education would be even better if more of the tasks you engage in during lessons encourage you to think deeply.

The headteacher and his colleagues have achieved a huge amount in moving the school forward over the past few years, and to your benefit. You can play your part by maintaining your high standards of behaviour and attendance, by working hard and by continuing to make a full contribution to the life of the school.

Yours sincerely

Robert Barbour
Her Majesty's Inspector

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like Ofsted to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone **0300 123 4234, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.**