

St Mark's West Essex Catholic School

Inspection report

Unique reference number	137058
Local authority	N/A
Inspection number	385571
Inspection dates	7–8 March 2012
Lead inspector	Alan Alder HMI

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

Type of school	Academy
School category	Non-maintained
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	1031
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	246
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Patrick Hay
Headteacher	Elaine Heaphy
Date of previous school inspection	N/A
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Age group	11–18
Inspection date(s)	7–8 March 2012
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Introduction

Inspection team

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Her Majesty's Inspector

Brigid Quest-Ritson

Additional inspector

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Raymond Lau

Additional inspector

This inspection was carried out with two days' notice. Inspectors observed 39 lessons and 38 teachers. They held meetings with groups of students, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Chair of the finance committee as well as with members of staff. Inspectors took account of the responses to the on-line questionnaire (Parent View) in planning the inspection. They observed the academy's work, and scrutinised a wide range of documentation including that relating to students' safety and their academic performance. In addition, inspection questionnaires completed by 73 parents and carers were analysed, along with those submitted by students and members of staff.

Information about the school

The predecessor school converted to academy status in August 2011. While it has a predominantly Catholic intake, the academy also takes students from other faiths. The headteacher is newly appointed, and joined the academy when it opened. Given the number of students on roll, the academy is about the same size as most secondary schools nationally. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is about half the national average. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups and whose first language is not English is above average. There are fewer disabled pupils and those with special educational needs than in most secondary schools. The number of students who leave or join the school other than at the usual times is lower than average. The results obtained by students in their GCSE examinations exceed the government's current floor standard which sets the minimum expectations for attainment and progress.

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness	4
Achievement of pupils	4
Quality of teaching	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils	2
Leadership and management	3

Key findings

- In accordance with section 13 (3) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires significant improvement, because it is performing significantly less well than in all the circumstances it could reasonably be expected to perform. The academy is therefore given a notice to improve. Significant improvement is required in relation to the attainment and progress of students in the sixth form.
- The academy is not satisfactory because attainment in the sixth form, which affects a quarter of the academy's students, is significantly below that found nationally and the progress that students make in this part of the school is inadequate. There has been insufficient monitoring of the quality of teaching and of the progress that students make in their work. Improved leadership and monitoring of teaching, including in the sixth form, are beginning to improve matters but there is much still to do. Consequently, the school's overall effectiveness is inadequate.
- Students' attainment in Years 7 to 11 is in line with age related expectations, and the progress they make is satisfactory. Students whose first language is not English make good progress.
- Teaching is broadly satisfactory, although it is stronger between Years 7-11 than in the sixth form where there is considerable variability between subjects.
- Students' behaviour is good and their attitudes to learning are a strength of the academy. Their attendance is improving well and is now above average. Their punctuality is good. The academy's leaders are thorough in ensuring the safety of students and almost all students say they feel safe.
- The headteacher provides strong leadership and is taking effective steps to bring about improvements to all aspects of the academy's work. New procedures have been implemented to ensure that leaders at all levels are held to account.
- The leadership of teaching is clearly focused and is bringing about

improvements. However, there is some inconsistency in the implementation of the academy's teaching and learning policies, for example checking on students' understanding and ensuring that students of all abilities are sufficiently challenged.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the attainment and progress of sixth form students by ensuring students are appropriately qualified for the courses they take; undertaking regular and frequent monitoring of students' progress and of the quality of the teaching they receive, and taking quick and effective action where necessary to help bring about improvements.
- Improve students' learning by developing the quality of teaching further so that as a matter of course teachers ensure that:
 - they assess students' understanding both during lessons and through the frequent marking of their work, and modify teaching approaches where learning is insufficient
 - students' different abilities are catered for in lessons so that all are challenged
 - students are given the opportunity to experience at first hand what they are learning about, whenever practicable and appropriate
 - there is improvement in students' presentation of their work.
- Increase accountability by providing measurable success criteria for actions being taken by leaders, with interim targets so that the progress made can be readily evaluated.

Main report

Achievement of pupils

Achievement over time in the sixth form has been inadequate. As a result of recent improvements made to the quality of teaching, the learning and progress of students including in the sixth form, are satisfactory. When they join the academy in Year 7, students' attainment is in line with the national average. Despite a three year decline, students leave the academy having reached average levels of attainment. This represents satisfactory progress. In the GCSE results in 2011, the attainment of girls in English was significantly lower than the national figure. The evidence provided by the academy's leaders, along with inspectors' observations and scrutiny of students' work, show an improving picture with the attainment of girls set to rise. Inspection evidence and the academy's data about students' performance do not support the views of parents and carers that students are making good progress.

Throughout the academy, students show interest in their work and they apply themselves to it sensibly. Their positive attitudes are exemplified by several students asking detailed questions of their teachers during the inspection. However, when the learning does not capture the interest of students, they become passive receivers of the information being presented. Students say that they learn most when the work is practical and fun. This is borne out by the observations made by inspectors. Learning

is also enhanced by good, probing questioning that provokes thought and reflection. Good examples of this were observed in a geography and in a physical education lesson. However, this is not typical. In some lessons, higher attaining students are not sufficiently challenged by the work they are asked to do. Disabled students and those with special educational needs receive some good support for their learning from teaching assistants; when this occurs this group of students make good progress, and overall they achieve in line with national averages. Those whose attainment was lower than average on entry make the most progress. Students whose first language is not English make good progress.

Quality of teaching

Inspection evidence shows that teaching throughout the academy, including the sixth form, is satisfactory. However, there is much variability in several aspects. For example, there is inconsistency in teachers' expectations of what students can achieve, sometimes in the same subject. In one English lesson, for example, high expectations led to students understanding a text well and engaging strongly with issues related to spirituality. However, in another lesson, the richness of a poem was not sufficiently explored. In mathematics, a well-planned lesson on vectors led to good learning. However, in a lesson about different types of triangles, time was wasted at the start of the lesson, leaving students with no opportunity to examine different triangles for themselves. This slowed their learning as a result. The use of questioning is also variable. In some lessons it is not used to assess students' understanding, to see if students need more guidance about the work, or is done too late in the lesson, so students have struggled to no good effect for too long. Nevertheless, some good assessment by students of each other's learning took place in a few lessons. A good example was observed in a physical education lesson with students learning about cricket; this led to good improvements in students' cricket skills. Good support for students who need it is provided in some lessons. For example, in one lesson to do with employability, a student was helped to write a good quality curriculum vitae. The teaching assistant used helpful reminders such as the need to check punctuation and the use of phonetics to help the student to work out the spelling of words. Parents, carers and students say that teaching is good at the academy. Despite some pockets of good practice, inspection findings show this view to be overly generous.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students move sensibly, calmly and safely around the school buildings. They form good relationships with each other and with the adults in the academy. Lessons too are calm; students are usually attentive and responsive. The low rate of exclusions has fallen further this year. The rate of exclusion for disabled students and those with special educational needs who receive additional support used to be relatively high; this has now reduced. The attendance of this group had been low, but is improving. However, it remains lower than for other groups in the school, largely due to medical reasons. Attendance, which was average, is currently above the national average. There has been a good reduction in the proportion of students who are persistently absent. Students report that there has been some bullying in the past. This had included some homophobic name calling and some bullying using electronic contact media. This has significantly reduced as a result of the effectiveness with

which the staff at the academy deal with issues brought to their attention. Parents and carers agree that behaviour is good, and students say they feel safe in school. Inspection evidence concurs with this.

Leadership and management

Although the headteacher has been in post for a relatively short period of time, her determination to raise standards of attainment and personal development through establishing high expectations throughout the school is bearing fruit. Achievement, attendance and behaviour are all improving well, demonstrating that the academy has the capacity to improve. The strengths and weaknesses of the academy have been evaluated and well-judged actions are being put in place to remedy shortcomings. Important changes have been introduced to enable leaders throughout the academy to be held to account. More monitoring of provision and its impact is now undertaken. The quality of teaching is evaluated more frequently, for example. While the judgements made are generally accurate, in some cases the emphasis of the observation of lessons has been placed on teachers' adoption of school policies, rather than on the impact that teaching has on students' learning. This leads to an overly positive view about the quality of teaching. Nevertheless, the work being done to improve teaching is beginning to have an effect with more use being made, for example, of a range of assessment strategies in lessons.

A range of approaches is being used to raise the quality of teaching, including individual support, with some early evidence of success. A thorough review of students' achievement has been introduced in each subject department and a programme of departmental reviews has been initiated. Early indications show that these are of good quality, being detailed and perceptive. However, departmental action plans are not yet good enough to help bring about the necessary improvements. There are some weaknesses in leadership. Although some leaders carry out the monitoring and evaluation of their areas, they do not take sufficient responsibility for bringing about the improvements that are needed. This includes the relative infrequency of the marking of work, and the poor condition of some of the students' books.

The academy's leaders recognise that some groups of students have historically not flourished. As a result, some additional provision has been arranged for girls who have low aspirations and self-esteem. Students, who receive extra support because of their special educational needs and/or disabilities, are provided with further support through after school and early morning sessions. Extra reading programmes have been established. There is also professional support for students who experience emotional difficulties. The academic progress, attendance and behaviour of some of these groups have shown recent improvements as a result.

For a small group of students in Years 10 and 11, there is suitable alternative curriculum provision for part of the week at a local college. For the great majority of students, however, the curriculum within the academy provides for the full range of interests, aspirations and abilities of students. There is good provision for students' spiritual, moral social and cultural development both through the range of subjects and extra-curricular activities offered, but also through the teaching approaches used. In mathematics and science not enough emphasis is placed on some parts of

the curriculum. There are too few opportunities in science for hypothesising, analysing and evaluating. In mathematics there are too few opportunities for students to decide what mathematical approaches are required to solve problems. The development of literacy across the different subjects of the curriculum is at a very early stage.

In the sixth form, the curriculum largely consists of academic courses and so complements well the provision available elsewhere in the town. However, the admission requirements for some courses are markedly lower than is usually found and lead to a relatively low proportion of high grades.

The governing body is knowledgeable about the academy's strengths and know where it needs to improve. They hold leaders to account and play a full part in strategic planning. The academy's arrangements for safeguarding students' meet statutory requirements.

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.
Attendance	the regular attendance of pupils at school and in lessons, taking into account the school's efforts to encourage good attendance.
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 Mark's West Essex Catholic School, Harlow, CM18 6AA

Thank you for the help you gave us when we inspected your academy. We spoke with a good number of you and found you to be helpful and sensible.

We found that your behaviour is good and that you are keen to learn. Most of you are making satisfactory progress in your learning. The teaching you receive is satisfactory. However, the sixth form is inadequate because students have been making inadequate progress in recent years. For that reason we are giving the academy a notice to improve. An inspector will visit again in six to eight months time to check on the progress being made and there will be another full inspection in the next 12 to 16 months.

Nevertheless, we can see that the academy is improving. Your attendance has risen, behaviour is better and learning is improving. Your new headteacher has judged accurately what needs to be done to quickly bring about further progress, and the necessary changes are already underway.

The inspectors have asked the academy's leaders to ensure that standards in the sixth form improve by monitoring students' progress frequently and by taking any action that is necessary if it is not. Throughout the school we have asked that teaching quality is developed further, for example by checking frequently that you understand the work and taking additional steps if you do not. We have also asked that your teachers make sure that those of you with different abilities are all equally well catered for in lessons. This is so that all of you are challenged, and that, whenever appropriate, you are given the opportunity to experience at first hand what you are learning about. We would also like to see the presentation of some of your work improve.

To bring this about your headteacher has to be able to make sure that all leaders are able to do what they need to do. We have suggested ways that this can be done.

You can all play a part by ensuring that you keep your work well organised and tidy.

Yours sincerely

Alan Alder
Her Majesty's Inspector

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