

St Thomas More Catholic School

Palace Fields, Buxton, SK17 6AF

Inspection dates 16–17 May 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	Good	2
Achievement of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Outstanding	1
Leadership and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- Students' achievement is good. They make good progress in most subjects. By the end of Key Stage 4, standards are well above average in the key subjects of English and mathematics.
- Disabled students and those who have special educational needs achieve well.
- Teaching in most lessons is good, and in some lessons it is outstanding.
- The behaviour of students is outstanding and their attitudes to learning are very positive.
- Relationships between staff and students are good and contribute to the very good atmosphere for learning found throughout the school. Students say they feel very safe.
- Leaders track students' progress carefully, check the quality of teaching rigorously and provide very good opportunities for teachers to improve their skills. This has helped them bring marked improvements to the school's overall effectiveness.
- Students' spiritual, moral, cultural and social education is outstanding.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Not enough teaching is outstanding, and a small amount requires improvement.
- Teachers do not always plan work that fully meets the needs of all students. In some lessons, the most able students are not sufficiently challenged.
- Students are not routinely encouraged to develop the kind of high-quality independent learning skills that would enable them to explore new ideas and find things out for themselves.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 29 lessons or parts of lessons. There were three joint observations with the headteacher and senior leaders, and 28 teachers were observed in total. Inspectors also observed an assembly and visited several registration sessions.
- Meetings were held with the senior leaders, a group of subject leaders, the special educational needs coordinator and a group of five governors. A telephone conversation took place with a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors met with three groups of students from Years 7, 9 and 11 and listened to their views.
- Fifteen staff members completed questionnaires, and these were taken into account by inspectors, along with the 54 responses from parents and carers to the online questionnaire (Parent View).
- Inspectors observed the school's work and looked at information about students' progress and attainment, the school's improvement plan and the school's analysis of how well it is doing. Inspectors also looked at the system for managing the performance of staff, records of governing body meetings and a range of policy documents.

Inspection team

Liz Talmadge, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Helen Owen	Additional Inspector
Christopher Teal	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- St Thomas More Catholic School is a smaller-than-average secondary school serving the town of Buxton and a number of villages in the High Peak area of Derbyshire.
- Approximately 60% of the students attending the school come from Roman Catholic households.
- Most students are from White British backgrounds and the proportion of students who speak English as an additional language is very low.
- The proportion of students supported by the pupil premium is much smaller than average. This is additional government funding for students known to be eligible for free school meals, in local authority care, or from families with a parent in the armed forces.
- The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs supported by school action plus or through a statement of special educational needs is broadly average. The proportion supported at school action is much lower than average.
- A very small number of students in Key Stage 4 attend at Buxton College, University of Derby for one day a week to study work-related courses in motor vehicle engineering, hair and beauty or public services.
- The school meets the current government floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the amount of good and outstanding teaching and learning across the school by ensuring that:
 - activities are closely matched to students' learning needs and build on their prior attainment at all times
 - all lessons provide consistently high levels of challenge for the most able students
 - students are routinely taught the skills required for independent learning, so they know how to find things out for themselves and how to make progress with their own learning.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils

is good

- Students join the school with above-average overall attainment and make good progress during their time in school. GCSE results in both English and mathematics have been significantly above average for the last three years. Students in the current Year 11 are on track to gain higher results than in 2012 at the end of this year.
- Results show that less-able students do particularly well. In 2012 middle-ability students made the slowest progress. Currently, the more-able students are not always making the same rapid progress as other groups.
- By the end of Key Stage 4, most students have made good progress in a wide range of subjects; it was particularly rapid in art and music. In 2012, progress was slower in chemistry and religious education. However, the learning seen in these subjects during the inspection was typically good, indicating that the school is making improvements.
- The pupil premium is used to provide mentoring and additional support for the small group of students who qualify for this funding. The average Year 11 attainment of eligible students was much higher than that of similar students nationally in English and mathematics in 2012. It was about half a GCSE grade behind that of their classmates in English and about two thirds behind in mathematics. Good support means that eligible students are currently making good progress in line with their classmates.
- Disabled students and those who have special educational needs make good progress. Students on school action achieve well. Those who have a statement of special educational needs, and those who are school action plus, do even better.
- The school usually enters students predicted to achieve A* and A grades early for GCSE mathematics. It did not do so in 2012 but will do so again this year. In general, this policy has been effective and has led to above-average results in this subject.
- Students have good literacy skills. They read widely and communicate effectively across a range of subjects.
- The school receives a small amount of Year 7 'catch-up' funding and this is used to provide additional literacy teaching. The school's assessment of students' reading standards demonstrates that the additional help they receive improves their reading skills.

The quality of teaching

is good

- The quality of teaching in the majority of subjects, including English and mathematics, is mainly good; some is outstanding.
- The best teaching helps students to make consistently good or better progress because teachers use excellent questioning techniques to challenge students' thinking and deepen their understanding.
- Relationships between staff and students are good, and this ensures lessons are uniformly calm and purposeful occasions that provide students with interesting learning experiences. Most

teachers have high expectations of what students can achieve and good subject knowledge. They teach key skills effectively and ensure that time is used well to ensure that students make rapid progress.

- Some teachers use small group work to help students to consolidate their learning. In a Year 10 lesson, for example, groups of students developed themselves as 'experts' and then shared their knowledge with others. This helped them to reinforce their learning effectively.
- Teachers check regularly to make sure students are making rapid progress. There were good examples seen of students checking each other's work in music, ICT, mathematics, Spanish and English, and good examples of informative marking and feedback in books that helped students understand precisely how they could improve their work.
- Teaching assistants make a strong contribution to the quality of teaching and the good progress of students. They are well prepared and provide continuity of support for particular classes. The work they do is appreciated by both staff and students.
- A minority of teaching requires improvement because it does not ensure students make the rapid progress seen elsewhere in the school. Where teaching is not yet good:
 - work is not well matched to the learning needs of all students and does not challenge the most able sufficiently
 - the skills that students need to work independently are not effectively taught to them
 - students have too few opportunities to work independently or to learn from each other.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

- Students' attitudes to learning are consistently at least good, and often outstanding. They are keen to learn, enjoy excellent relationships with their teachers, are well mannered and polite, and make a significant contribution to the positive atmosphere within the school.
- The excellent behaviour of students during lessons is a key factor in their good learning and achievement. When given the opportunity to learn independently, they support each other well by working purposefully in small groups and pairs.
- In discussions with groups of students during the inspection students told inspectors that they felt safe in school, and this view was echoed by their parents. They say that bullying is rare and that if it does happen, it is dealt with quickly by staff.
- Students like the way they are all well known by the staff. They have particular praise for the headteacher, who they say is often around and about the school, talking to them and helping them to understand the best way of doing things. They like the small size of the school and believe this contributes to the quality of their relationships with staff and with each other.
- The majority of students like coming to school, attend regularly and punctually, and are proud of their school. They are enthusiastic about the wide range of clubs and activities that they can take part in. Year 9 students spoke very positively about the 'retreat' that they had attended earlier in the year. It was regarded as a time to enjoy a lot of activities but also an opportunity for deeper reflection on a wide range of issues. Year 11 students value the opportunity to take on the additional responsibility of being school prefects.

- Students appreciate the wide range of sporting, cultural, arts and 'eco' opportunities that they have and large numbers of them participate in a wide range of clubs, activities and fundraising events during and beyond the school day. They are also keen to take part in the opportunities offered to them to travel to destinations in Europe and beyond.
- Exclusions from school are below average, and there have been no permanent exclusions for many years. The school works well within a consortium of local schools to support alternatives to exclusion. It provides alternative courses in partnership with Buxton College to motivate a small number of students, who benefit from the well-planned and well-taught work-related courses it offers. The school also ensures that there are facilities and staff available at breaks and lunchtimes to support students whose circumstances make them vulnerable.

The leadership and management are good

- St Thomas More Catholic School is a calm and purposeful school where good teaching ensures most students make good progress. The commitment of the headteacher and his senior team to the continued improvement of the school is reflected in their good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses, and their enthusiasm to secure the best possible outcomes for students.
- Systems for checking the quality of teaching are good. The senior team carry out regular reviews of teaching, students' progress, marking and assessment during 'focus weeks'. These observations directly inform decisions about teachers' pay but are also used to plan staff training activities and other initiatives to support improved teaching.
- Subject leaders carry out regular performance reviews of their team of teachers so that they, too, can support teachers and improve their teaching. Consequently, the majority of teaching in most subject areas is now good or better and standards are rising overall.
- Students' progress and attainment are tracked carefully. The data collected are made available to subject leaders and their teams, and in the best lessons are used to plan activities that meet the needs of all groups of students. They are not always used effectively to plan learning experiences that really challenge the most able students.
- Students are offered a good range of subjects to study, and the school looks constantly to enrich the opportunities and experiences available to students. The teaching of Latin, for example, now takes place at lunchtimes.
- Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural education is a real strength of the school. Students are reflective and tolerant, and benefit from the many opportunities they have to explore moral, spiritual and cultural issues. Students regard the guidance they are given during personal, social and health education lessons as 'learning skills for life', and take these lessons very seriously.
- Safeguarding and child protection processes and procedures meet current national requirements. They are very good and well managed.
- The local authority offers a small amount of support to the school by carrying out an annual review of its performance. This is valued by the school.

■ The governance of the school:

- The governing body makes a positive contribution to the good leadership and management of the school. Governors recognise that the quality of teaching has improved since the last inspection because of the rigorous approach taken by the headteacher. Governors are a well-informed and skilled group of people, who are familiar with the school's strengths and weaknesses and possess a good understanding of its priorities. They fully support the school's actions to ensure that when students leave school at 16, they are well-rounded individuals with good GCSE results and positive attitudes towards the next stage of their education or later life. Governors know what is happening in school. For example, they are aware of how the pupil premium has been used and the impact it has had. Governors monitor the work of the school through their committees, challenge the headteacher and the senior team appropriately and make decisions about rewarding teachers' performance on the basis of evidence gathered through a thorough performance management process.
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What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	112971
Local authority	Derbyshire
Inspection number	413433

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	393
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Father Dennis Higgins
Headteacher	Brendan Hickey
Date of previous school inspection	10 December 2008
Telephone number	01298 23167
Fax number	01298 25816
Email address	enquiries@st-thomasmore.derbyshire.sch.uk

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