

The St Thomas the Apostle College

Hollydale Road, London, SE15 2EB

Inspection dates 27–28 November 2014

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Requires improvement	3
	This inspection:	Outstanding	1
Leadership and management		Outstanding	1
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Outstanding	1
Quality of teaching		Outstanding	1
Achievement of pupils		Outstanding	1

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school.

- In 2014, over three-quarters of students attained five or more A* to C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics. Two years earlier, less than half of them attained this standard.
- Students' progress in the last two years has been outstanding, in the top 1% in mathematics in 2013 and well above average in English, science and many other subjects.
- A vast improvement in teaching has generated the dramatic upward surge in achievement. Teaching is focused on success for all so that effective support is put in place for any boy that needs it.
- The courses boys follow are carefully adjusted to match their aspirations and abilities. As a result every boy, in every year, makes almost the same strong progress regardless of his ethnicity, starting point or special educational needs.
- The most able students attain more than the national percentage of top GCSE grades. Disadvantaged or vulnerable students make at least the same progress as others.
- Students' behaviour in lessons and around the school is impeccable. One young student observed that 'we enter the school as boys and leave as men'. The boys are outstandingly polite, thoughtful and get on extremely well with each other and with teachers.
- Staff enjoy working at the school because students are so attentive and keen to learn, so that lessons flow smoothly and calmly. Staff receive excellent professional development.
- The improvements of the past two years would not have happened without the outstanding leadership and management of the executive head and the headteacher. Their complementary skills and experience have underpinned the school's rapid march forward.
- A teacher observed accurately that 'exceptional measures have been taken over the last three years', mirroring other comments made by the excellent senior leadership team, dedicated middle leaders and other staff. All staff support the school's aims with enthusiasm and hard work.
- Students are very well prepared for their future lives both in terms of career advice and personal development. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is given high priority.
- Governors are extremely proud of the school and delighted that their strengthened support and analysis of the school's work have contributed to its success. Having been through the problem years of the past, they realise that regular monitoring and probing have to be a routine part of their work.
- Pastoral care and safeguarding arrangements are outstanding; students feel very safe at school. Leaders involve parents and the local community fully in the school's work. Equally, the school contributes to stability and growth in the local area.
- A boy said, 'Don't focus on the past as the future has more in store.' As the school approaches its 50-year anniversary, plans are well in place for the students in its new, mixed sixth form to achieve as well as boys do in Years 7 to 11.

Information about this inspection

- The inspection team observed 35 part-lessons, many of which were jointly observed with members of the senior leadership team. Inspectors observed an assembly and tutor times.
- Inspectors spoke to many students informally as well as meeting the school council and students from several year groups.
- Inspectors held meetings with the executive head, the headteacher, other members of the senior leadership team and staff with responsibility for subjects and other aspects of the school's work.
- Interviews were held with the Chair of the Governing Body and three other governors, a representative of the local authority and an external consultant who visits the school regularly.
- Inspectors discussed their observations with teaching staff and examined a range of documents, including the school's development plan, minutes of senior leaders' and governors' meetings and data about progress, standards, exclusions, attendance and behaviour.
- Inspectors looked at a range of students' work in lessons and outside of lessons.
- Inspectors took into account 43 questionnaires completed by members of staff. There were only two responses to Ofsted's online Parent View questionnaire.

Inspection team

Clare Gillies, Lead inspector	Additional inspector
Hugh Betterton	Additional inspector
John Cavill	Additional inspector
Keith Homewood	Additional inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The school is smaller than the average-sized secondary school.
- A mixed sixth form will open in September 2015.
- The executive head is the headteacher of Sacred Heart Catholic School, with which the school has been in a soft federation since early in 2012. The headteacher took up post two terms before the previous inspection. Governors have agreed to extend this federation in the future.
- Most students who attend the school are of Black African or Black Caribbean heritage.
- A slightly higher-than-average proportion of students speak English as an additional language, of whom a small number are at an early stage of learning English.
- A well-above-average proportion of students receive support through the pupil premium, which is additional government funding for specific groups, including children who are looked after and students known to be eligible for free school meals. The school has a small number of looked after children.
- The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs is similar to that seen nationally. The most common needs relate to students on the autistic spectrum.
- A small number of students are eligible for Year 7 catch-up funding, which is for students who did not achieve the expected Level 4 in reading or mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2.
- The school does not use any off-site, additional education provision.
- The school runs a breakfast club before school.
- The school exceeds the government's current floor standard, which sets the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the monitoring of morning and afternoon tutor sessions to ensure that:
 - time is used productively and that it includes, when practical, discussions which are relevant to the boys' lives and futures
 - sessions are used consistently well within and between year groups.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management are outstanding

- Changes at the highest level have been behind the school's transformation since the previous inspection. It is not surprising that leaders from other schools have sought advice about how to make such rapid improvements.
- Many new, very effective subject leaders and teachers have joined the school in the last three years. In only a couple of subjects have senior leaders not been able to appoint the high quality of leadership they want but alternative arrangements are as good as possible.
- Middle leaders, heads of year and support staff are quite clear that the improvements of the last two years stem from the insistence on high expectations, the tight procedures and policies introduced, students' improved attitudes to learning and the ways they are held to account for boys' progress. They know that their yearly appraisals will reflect the quality of their teaching and results. Staff morale is very high, with comments such as 'I am a better teacher as a result of the improvements' or 'I am very proud that I work here.'
- Leadership of teaching and the quality of professional development for teachers are outstanding. Senior leaders monitor learning accurately and organise numerous ways to develop staff's expertise further. They arrange regular training sessions after school, mini-sessions in the morning, external consultants' support and staff visits to other schools, particularly Sacred Heart Catholic School. Both schools benefit from this successful soft federation.
- Attendance and punctuality have risen because leaders and support staff are vigilant about checking and dealing with any absence but are also sensitive to special circumstances related to different faith and cultural backgrounds. Behaviour has improved because effective policies are in place, and their impact is reviewed regularly. These actions reflect the school's promotion of equality of opportunity which is seen in so much of its work. A breakfast club, partly paid for by additional funding, gives many boys a good start in the morning.
- Other uses of pupil premium and catch-up funds have been extremely effective in raising achievement. Their impact is assessed carefully. Examples include extra staffing to provide small classes for those who struggle in English and mathematics, computer programs that improve reading, and subsidised music lessons. Creative subjects have also benefited from smaller classes.
- The curriculum emphasises the importance of English and mathematics but includes a good mix of creative and technology subjects and vocational courses. The number and type of subjects students study are adjusted to respond to their individual needs and abilities. Extra-curricular provision is rich, for example cadets, philosophy club and chess group.
- In addition to teaching boys about how to manage their finances, the school gives excellent information about post-16 options linked to careers and their aspirations. There are 'expectation' evenings for each year group with external organisations guiding parents' and students' thinking about boys' futures. In the past nearly all of them have progressed to further education, training or employment.
- Assemblies, time spent with tutors and many lessons, particularly in religious education, contribute strongly to the outstanding development of boys' spiritual, moral, social and cultural awareness. They foster good relationships and strengthen boys' understanding of British values, particularly about discrimination, and their preparation for life in modern Britain.
- In a religious education lesson, students thought deeply about the values related to how gender roles have changed in recent decades. The school hosted a successful Faith Forum which was led by a teacher and two students with a different faith from the majority of the school community.
- However, with 20 minutes in the morning and 15 minutes at the end of the day, a small number of tutors could use this time more productively. Boys who do not choose to take GCSE citizenship do not discuss news items which are relevant to their lives and futures often enough.
- The local authority and an external consultant have supported the school well during its transformation.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governors know all about the school's results and how they compare with the national picture. They know about the quality of teaching and have fully supported the changes to staffing. They receive detailed performance and teaching information on which they assess pay rises; these are not granted automatically.
 - Governors ensure that the school's safeguarding and child protection arrangements are of a high standard with up-to-date procedures and training, and meet statutory requirements.
 - The governing body is now highly effective and composed of members with a wealth of relevant professional and personal experiences which contribute to their regular, analytical meetings.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding**Behaviour**

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding both in lessons and around the school. A recently appointed member of staff wrote, 'I am bowled over by the behaviour and engagement of the boys'; inspectors felt the same. Boys are respectful, polite and welcoming; they wear their smart uniform with pride.
- Students acquire knowledge and understanding or master and practise skills rapidly because they concentrate extremely well in lessons. Their resilience is reflected in their outstanding attitudes to learning. They take care over the presentation of their work and appreciate that legible handwriting will serve them well in examinations.
- Students never interrupt the flow of lessons because they are enthusiastic and keen to learn, although one of them remarked that 'teachers have eyes in the back of their heads - you can't get away with anything!' Boys value enormously the points awarded for any good actions and achievement and that parents are sent postcards about their successes.
- Attendance, which is well above average, and punctuality have risen steadily since the previous inspection. Exclusions have fallen; there have been no permanent exclusions in the last 14 months.
- The democratically elected school council meets regularly and, along with prefects, is an active force for change. Students have contributed to plans for the new sixth form, visiting other schools to see how they operate. The council is the backbone for fund raising, to which boys give generously. Members meet with the police commissioner to discuss youth policing issues and run sports clubs in local primary schools.

Safety

- The school's work to keep pupils safe and secure is outstanding. Information and discussion, for example about bullying (extremely rare) and local issues including gangs and knife crime, are built into the school's thorough provision for personal, social and health education.
- Safety awareness permeates many lessons, assemblies and tutor times as well whole days when speakers are brought in to tackle topics such as homophobia or sex and relationships education. The boys realise that homophobic banter and discrimination will not be tolerated by the school. They are well informed about internet dangers, particularly social media sites.
- Many boys explain how the school plays an important part in their lives and one described it as 'unique'. They often stay late after lessons have finished, attending sport or music sessions, extra lessons, or enjoying other activities such as table tennis or spending time with their friends.

The quality of teaching is outstanding

- Teachers' enthusiasm for their subjects, expert subject knowledge, high expectations and skilful selection of stimulating resources all combine to generate outstanding learning. The cumulative impact of three years of outstanding learning is that fewer interventions are needed in Year 11 as these students have already made so much progress.
- Well-planned lessons start promptly and students cover a lot of ground. Students have progressed through a large volume of work in all subjects, often in considerable depth.
- In addition to reading at least once a week in tutor time, teachers make sure that lessons include reading and writing on a regular basis. When unfamiliar words emerge, students discuss them and write down definitions. Students are expected to use accurate, subject-specific terminology in all their writing.
- Similarly, to reinforce students' numeracy skills, teachers of other subjects link work to skills taught in mathematics, for example referring to correlation when analysing climate graphs in geography, calculating percentages of mass in science or analysing a complex graph on migration factors in citizenship.
- In French and Italian lessons, hardly a word of English is spoken so students' accents and vocabulary are outstanding. In art, respect for different abilities helps all students to be creative and confident.
- Many teachers ask questions which check and deepen students' understanding very effectively. Students' learning is outstanding in mathematics because their mastery of calculations is often probed through problem solving. In English, questions focus on close analysis of grammar or make students interrogate texts forensically and 'keep digging'.
- Learning is regularly linked to real life, such as evaluating the use of global positioning systems in business environments in mathematics or discussing the moral issues raised by *Lord of the Flies* in English. In physical education, students relate the skills they learn to the rules of a game and in business studies they evaluate one company's marketing strategy against general principles.
- Homework is regular and meaningful. One student described marking as being a 'conversation with

teachers'. The school's focus on useful and constructive marking is having a positive impact because students respond to specific comments and guidance about how to improve their work.

- Teachers assess standards accurately, keep meticulous records of progress and provide intervention and extra sessions as necessary, often on Saturday mornings. Students are very appreciative of the extra help they receive.
- Students who need to improve their reading, writing or mathematics receive high-quality, concentrated support in small groups, often before and after school; they make rapid progress. Those with special educational needs are very well supported in class and in sessions to help them with particular aspects of their learning.
- Students with limited fluency in English learn the language quickly. They receive expert support outside of lessons. Teachers skilfully help them to keep up in lessons, for example by preparing translated sheets or sitting students next to those who are fluent in their language and in English.
- With the sixth form opening in September 2015, teachers realise that they must develop students' research skills and confidence to study independently, and deepen understanding for those wishing to continue beyond GCSE, particularly middle ability students in science, for example. Nevertheless, teachers' success in raising standards in the last two years confirms that they know exactly how to prepare students for examinations.

The achievement of pupils

is outstanding

- GCSE results rose dramatically in 2013 when close to three-quarters of students attained five or more A*–C grades including English and mathematics; in 2014 this increased further.
- The school's predictions for GCSE results in 2013 and 2014 were lower than the actual outcomes. Accurate school tracking information suggests that 2015 results will be at least as high as those attained in 2014. Students' work shows that they have made outstanding progress since the beginning of this academic year.
- In 2013, the proportion of students who made at least the progress expected nationally in English and mathematics was much higher than national figures. In 2014, the proportion of students who made more than expected progress in English and mathematics was more than double national figures.
- The most able students' GCSE results were even better in 2014 than in 2013. In English, mathematics, biology, chemistry and physics, for example, they exceeded the national percentages for the top A*/A grades. This supports the aspirations of several who wish to pursue medical or scientific careers. Students who are gifted, for example in mathematics, take GCSE early, always attain the top grade and then move on to AS-level work.
- More students will take the separate sciences in 2015. In 2014, in two-thirds of the GCSE subjects taken by students, the A*/A percentages were above national figures and only a few subjects did not record an 80% or higher pass rate.
- Disadvantaged students attained a higher percentage of five GCSE grades A*–C including English and mathematics than other students in 2013 and did equally well in 2014. The standards they attain and the progress they make are well above those achieved by all students nationally. In 2013, they attained one-sixth of a GCSE grade lower than others in English and under one-third in mathematics. These gaps have narrowed in the last two years.
- Black Caribbean students did not do as well as others in 2013 but the actions taken by the school eradicated this gap in 2014 so that all ethnic groups achieved equally well. Students with special educational needs do not attain as highly as others but their progress often exceeds expectations based on their individual learning needs.

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	100857
Local authority	Southwark
Inspection number	452954

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	11–16
Gender of pupils	Boys
Number of pupils on the school roll	590
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Joseph Reed
Headteacher	Serge Cefai (executive head) Eamon Connolly (headteacher)
Date of previous school inspection	22–23 May 2013
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