

Holy Cross College

Sixth form college

Inspection dates

31 January – 3 February 2017

Overall effectiveness		Requires improvement	
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires improvement	16 to 19 study programmes	Requires improvement
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement		
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good		
Outcomes for students	Requires improvement		
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection		Outstanding	

Summary of key findings

This is a provider that requires improvement

- Senior leaders have not identified the weaknesses in underperforming subjects accurately and have been too slow to implement effective improvement strategies.
- Governors have not recognised the significance of the decline in standards in some departments and therefore have not provided sufficient challenge to senior leaders.
- The quality of students' learning is not consistently good across subjects.
- In several key subjects, too many students do not make the progress of which they are capable.
- Teachers do not systematically plan learning activities that challenge the most able students.
- Teachers do not intervene swiftly enough when students fall behind in their work as their tracking of students' progress is not robust enough.

The provider has the following strengths

- The vast majority of students pass their qualifications and successfully progress to higher education.
- Leaders and staff promote a culture of respect and tolerance in which students from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds feel safe; this culture embraces the values and ethos of the college's founders.
- Students, particularly those who need additional support, develop their confidence and self-esteem well because the arrangements for pastoral care and support are strong.
- Good advice and guidance enables students to make secure decisions about their future education and careers options.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Holy Cross College is a Catholic sixth form college located in Bury, Greater Manchester. The college provides 16 to 19 study programmes, mainly through an A-level programme with a small amount of vocational provision. Currently, 2,057 students are enrolled at the college, all of whom are following 16 to 19 study programmes. Two thousand students are on level 3 programmes and 56 on level 2.
- Around one in 10 students do not have a GCSE qualification at grade C or above in English and/or mathematics when they start their courses at the college. The proportion of students who leave school in Bury with five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, is higher than the national figure.
- The Metropolitan Borough of Bury has a population of 187,900. The unemployment rate for Bury is slightly higher than that nationally. The proportion of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) is slightly lower than the regional average.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that:
 - teachers take into account students' starting points when planning lessons so that learning activities challenge the most able students
 - all teachers have high expectations of what their students can achieve, and that the pace and level of learning in lessons reflects this, including through their questioning and other assessment techniques
 - teachers monitor and assess the progress of students closely to enable them to achieve the progress of which they are capable
 - effective assessment practices are identified and shared across all subjects so that students know consistently what they need to do to improve
 - teachers track their students' progress carefully so that they are able to intervene quickly when students fall behind.
- Governors, senior leaders and managers need to ensure that the recently implemented intervention strategies are rigorously and consistently applied across all underperforming subjects, in order to bring about improvements in students' progress.
- Strengthen the quality assurance and self-assessment processes, to ensure that strengths and weaknesses are identified accurately, and appropriate interventions are implemented quickly.
- Governors need to challenge senior leaders more robustly so that they meet their performance targets and inconsistencies in students' achievement are reduced.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- Governors and senior leaders have not maintained high-quality provision. The quality of teaching, learning and assessment and students' outcomes requires improvement. In 2014/15, senior leaders introduced actions to improve the performance of the significant minority of subjects where students' outcomes had declined. The impact of leaders' actions has led to improvements in a few subjects but students' progress continues to require improvement in most of these underperforming subjects. In 2015/16, AS-level pass rates improved but they remain below those of similar colleges. A significant number of current students are working below their target grades.
- Leaders and managers have not challenged weaknesses in teaching, learning and assessment adequately to ensure that all students make at least the progress expected. Teachers speak confidently about the value of the staff development they receive to improve specific aspects of their teaching practice. However, this is not yet translating into consistently good teaching, learning and assessment.
- Leaders and managers have revised the self-assessment process to ensure that middle managers are held to account for the performance of the subjects. Managers now review one another's self-assessment reports with guidance from senior leaders. While the new system provides a more consistent approach to self-assessment across the college, in too many instances, managers' evaluations of the quality of the provision are overly descriptive and positive. In judging quality, managers' focus is primarily on retention and pass rates and insufficient attention is given to students' progress and the grades that students achieve relative to their starting points. In a minority of subjects, changes made to quality assurance processes are leading to more-accurate identification of strengths and weaknesses, better sharing of effective practice and changes to teaching and assessment practices.
- Targets in the college's quality improvement plan are not specific enough. Leaders' monitoring of the impact of the actions taken to bring about improvements is not effective. Although senior leaders are allocated responsibilities for ensuring that specific actions are completed, the timescales for their completion are vague and some actions, where deadlines have passed, are still showing as being 'in progress'.
- Governors and leaders continue to focus on creating a supportive learning environment with good pastoral support where students feel valued and safe. This culture embraces the values and ethos of the college's founders, governors and senior leaders and prepares students well for life in their communities and in wider modern Britain.
- Senior leaders ensure that the college's curriculum, including the wide range of enrichment activities, meets the needs and interests of the diverse range of students and local communities. In 2015/16, senior leaders introduced level 2 courses to meet the needs of students who did not have the GCSE grades to study a level 3 qualification. One third of these students progressed to a level 3 academic course within the college; the remainder progressed to apprenticeships, further study or employment.
- Over the past two years, senior leaders and managers have improved their approach to the performance management of teachers, but the impact is too slow. They have targeted subjects where students' achievement and progress rates are low and, as a result, a few

staff have left the college. In too many underperforming subjects, students' achievements or levels of progress have not improved. For example, A-level students in chemistry, psychology and history have underachieved for the last three years. In their performance reviews, teachers' targets are often too vague and difficult to measure, resulting in staff being unclear when they have or have not achieved their targets.

- Leaders, managers and teachers make good use of the college's long-standing and collaborative links with neighbouring schools to help students transfer smoothly from school to college and settle into college quickly. Students receive good advice and guidance that helps them to make secure decisions about their future education and career options. The support that students get to help them apply to and prepare for higher education is very effective, resulting in most students progressing to university.

The governance of the provider

- Governors were too slow to recognise the significance of the decline in the college's performance over the last three years, particularly in respect of students' progress and the proportion achieving high grades. Up until this academic year, governors have not had the appropriate information to challenge senior leaders who have not achieved their appraisal targets for two consecutive years.
- Governors have recently improved their scrutiny of the college's in-year performance. They have requested and now receive more regular and detailed reports about the impact of management actions on subjects requiring improvement. Consequently, governors are becoming more effective in providing suitable challenge to senior leaders, but it has not yet brought about the improvement required in all the identified subjects.
- Governors and senior leaders continue their effective scrutiny of the college's finances and ensure a sound financial position. This has enabled senior leaders to invest in the development of high-quality accommodation and resources.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Safeguarding policies and procedures are updated regularly and understood well by staff. Leaders and managers promote a strong culture of feeling and being safe in the college, which they have extended very effectively to embrace their responsibilities under the 'Prevent' duty.
- Designated safeguarding staff work effectively with a range of external agencies to respond swiftly to individual safeguarding cases as they arise. They also liaise closely and regularly with the local authority multi-agency 'Prevent' group to share information and concerns. Local schools and community groups value the contributions made by staff and students in supporting their work with different cultures and faiths in the town.
- Managers complete appropriate checks on all staff and volunteers prior to recruitment to ensure their suitability. Records of staff checks are comprehensive and up to date.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- The vast majority of students are studying academic qualifications at AS level or A level. A small number of students are studying vocational qualifications at level 2 or 3. Over a

third of students are studying science and mathematics programmes; the remainder are following mainly subjects in business, law, languages, literature and the arts.

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is not consistently good across all subjects. Most teachers do not systematically use information regarding students' starting points to plan different activities to meet students' individual needs and levels of ability. In many lessons, students complete the same tasks and activities, regardless of their ability. This results in a lack of challenge for the most able students, who complete the work quickly and have to wait for others to catch up. Where extension activities are used, most consist of a variation of the work completed in the previous activity and at the same level. Consequently, these activities do not enable students to develop more-advanced skills and knowledge. In a minority of lessons, the least able students struggle to complete activities in the time allowed. However, where learning is well planned, for example in drama and music, students benefit from high levels of challenge, are fully engaged and make good progress.
- The college's online tracking of students' progress identifies that too many students are working below their target grades. However, not all teaching staff are making effective use of this electronic monitoring system, which is leading to inconsistencies in the tracking of students' performance. Consequently, intervention to improve students' performance when they are falling behind is not always prompt or effective. Staff do not always set clear targets for students and too often they focus on the completion of tasks rather than on the development of specific knowledge and skills. Progress for a minority of A-level students has declined and is below what they achieved in their AS examinations.
- Teachers do not use questioning techniques consistently well to extend students' knowledge and develop their higher-level skills such as analysis and critical evaluation. Teachers do not routinely give students enough time to reflect and develop extended responses. They too readily expand the answers to their questions themselves rather than encouraging students to develop more complex responses.
- Students are not always clear about what they need to do to improve their work and make better progress. The regularity of the assessment of students' understanding and progress is not frequent enough in several subjects. In a significant minority of subjects, teachers do not provide sufficient academic guidance to enable their students to improve their work. In modern foreign languages, English language and photography students are clear about the mistakes they have made and how to develop their written work; consequently, students on these courses make good progress and many achieve high grades.
- At the start of their course, students have a thorough and effective introduction to the college and their programmes. As a result, they quickly settle into life at the college and understand the range of support services available to them.
- Students enjoy their learning and take pride in their work. As a result, the majority of students show positive attitudes to study, even when activities do not sufficiently challenge them. The majority of students are respectful and comply with teachers' requests, but the lack of challenge creates low-level disruption in a very small minority of lessons.
- Students recognise the importance of English and mathematics skills to support their wider career aspirations. They attend additional mathematics sessions to help them

achieve their core subject, for example in economics, science subjects and information and communication technology. Students develop effective speaking skills that prepare them well for their next steps. Teachers routinely reinforce students' use of spoken English during learning activities, which develops their confidence and enables them to join in debate, group discussion and negotiation during lessons. For example, students discuss topics such as voting for under 18s, the power of social media, particularly in relation to future employment opportunities, human gene ethics and Brexit.

- Staff promote equality of opportunity and celebrate diversity in their lessons through a range of interesting topics. For example, teachers link learning to current affairs such as British and American politics, values within faiths, gender and culture bias and influential people, for example, black leaders, female scholars and feminists in theology.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

- Students have high standards of behaviour and show considerable respect for each other, staff and visitors. They are tolerant of each other's differences and respect individuals from different cultures and backgrounds. Equality and diversity are promoted well through a variety of activities, for example the faith ambassador project, where student representatives from different faiths share their faith and what it means to them with primary school pupils.
- Students benefit from effective and impartial careers guidance from professional advisers and local employers. This enables students to make informed choices about their future education and employment choices. The vast majority of students access the college's online careers and employability log, which provides a range of useful activities to enable students to build up a detailed profile of their work skills which they are developing during their studies. Students use their self-reflections well and develop high-quality personal statements for university applications. Students take part in a wide range of activities, such as visits to universities, employers and overseas trips, which raise students' aspirations for their next steps. They benefit from career mentoring by former students.
- Many students on programmes at levels 2 and 3 participate in meaningful external work experience which helps them to understand the needs of the workplace and to explore their future career aspirations further.
- The vast majority of students further develop good social, personal and team-building skills through their participation in a wide range of internal enrichment activities. For example, students participate in a variety of societies, including the college's orchestra, play a number of sports for competition or recreational purposes, and participate in multi-cultural activities such as henna hand-painting and the international food festival. A small group of students completed a research project on female genital mutilation and used their findings to train staff and raise awareness of this practice among their peers. The project received international recognition from the United Nations.
- Students develop their English skills well as a result of the strong focus that teachers place on developing writing and speaking skills in lessons. Students improve their understanding and use of subject-specific terminology and concepts that they will need for examinations, future study and for employment successfully.
- Staff support students effectively, which develops their confidence and self-esteem, for example, through a variety of activities, such as the chaplaincy, the tutorial programme

and pastoral care. College staff work effectively with external support services to provide specialist help to vulnerable students, for example, mental health services, Streetwise, Early Break, the Asian Development Association of Bury, Bury multi-agency safeguarding hub and the Channel Panel.

- Staff place a high priority on keeping students safe. As a result, students feel and are kept safe. Students have a good understanding of the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism and the actions they would need to take if they had concerns. They also know how to keep themselves safe online. The debate society provides safe opportunities for students to discuss openly current issues and their potential impacts on society, for example, equal rights for women in the context of the recent US presidential election.
- Most students attend well and are punctual to lessons. In September 2016, a level 2 coordinator was appointed to improve issues such as poor attendance and retention on this programme. As a result, no students have left this programme but a small number have poor attendance.
- A few students are not always prepared for learning, which impedes their progress. For example, in a small number of classes observed, students did not have the necessary equipment with them.

Outcomes for students

Requires improvement

- The progress that students make is too dependent upon which subjects they study. In a few key AS- and A-level subjects, including geography, economics, physics and chemistry, students do not make the progress of which they are capable. In the weakest subjects, there is only marginal improvement in the proportion of students achieving high grades. Students in several AS- and A-level subjects and most vocational courses make good progress, for example, A-level graphic design, English language, film studies, French and AS-level law, French, media, information and communication technology.
- The current retention rate is high for the vast majority of A-level, AS-level and vocational subjects, with a large majority of subjects retaining all students. Pass rates are high and most students achieve their qualifications.
- Leaders and managers monitor the performance of different groups of students and have reduced most gaps, including that between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students. Students who need extra help to achieve their qualifications and those for whom the college receives high-needs funding receive effective support and consequently achieve at least as well as their peers. Students with specialist support needs overcome significant barriers to achieve their learning goals.
- The vast majority of students who achieve their A-level qualifications progress to higher education, and the proportion who go to prestigious universities, conservatoires and specialist colleges is higher than that from similar colleges.
- GCSE achievement rates at grades A* to C for English and mathematics are significantly higher than the national rate.

Provider details

Unique reference number	130499
Type of provider	Sixth form college
Age range of students	16 to 19
Approximate number of all students over the previous full contract year	2,000
Principal/CEO	David Frost
Telephone number	0161 762 4500
Website	www.holycross.ac.uk

Provider information at the time of the inspection

Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4 or above	
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
Total number of students (excluding apprenticeships)	0	0	56	0	1,996	4	0	0
Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+		
	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Number of traineeships	16–19		19+		Total			
	0		0		0			
Number of students aged 14 to 16	0							
Number of students for which the provider receives high-needs funding	10							
Funding received from:	Education Funding Agency							
At the time of inspection, the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	None							

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the deputy principal, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the college's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, and online questionnaires to gather the views of students and employers; these views are reflected within the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the college.

Inspection team

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