



**Office for Standards
in Education**

Inspection report
St Thomas Aquinas RC High School

Manchester Education Authority

Dates of inspection: 27 and 28 September 2004

This inspection was carried out under section 3 of the School Inspections Act 1996 and was deemed a section 10 inspection under the same Act

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Basic information about the school

Name of school:	St Thomas Aquinas RC High School
Type of school:	Secondary
Status:	Voluntary Aided
Age range of pupils:	11 to 16 years
Headteacher:	Mr J O'Callaghan
Address of school:	Nell Lane Chorlton-cum-Hardy Manchester M21 7SW
Telephone:	0161 881 9448
Name and address of appropriate authority:	The governing body, address as above
Chair of governors:	Reverend T Connolly
Local education authority area:	Manchester
Unique reference number:	105574
Name of reporting inspector:	Mr M Cladingbowl HMI
Dates of inspection:	27 and 28 September 2004

Introduction

1. St Thomas Aquinas RC High School is situated in Chorlton-cum-Hardy, south of the city centre of Manchester. There are 474 pupils on roll and the school is much smaller than average. Fifty nine per cent of the pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is well above average. Forty three per cent of the pupils have special ed needs, including 13 pupils who have a Statement of Special Educational Need. These figures are high. Fifty two per cent of the pupils are from ethnic minority groups but few pupils speak English as an additional language. Mobility is high, with many pupils joining or leaving the school during the year. The pupils' attainment on entry to the school is well below average.
2. The school was inspected in February 2003. The inspection was critical of many aspects of the work of the school and the school was made subject to special measures because it was failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education.
3. The governors drew up an action plan to address the key issues from the inspection of February 2004. The school was visited by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI) on three occasions to monitor the progress being made.
4. In September 2004, two HMI inspected the school, assessing the standard of education provided and the progress the school has made, in particular in relation to the main findings and key issues in the inspection report of February 2003.

Main findings

5. In accordance with section 14 of the School Inspections Act 1996, I am of the opinion that the school no longer requires special measures, since it is now providing an acceptable standard of education for its pupils. The main findings of the inspection are:
 - the pupils' standards of attainment are generally improving at both key stages, although they remain below those expected nationally. In 2003, the pupils' results in the end-of-Key Stage 3 National Curriculum tests were well above average compared to similar schools. In the GCSE or equivalent examinations, the pupils' results were above average compared to similar schools. National benchmarks are not yet available for 2004, but the pupils' results were similar to those achieved in 2003;
 - the pupils make satisfactory progress. The quality of learning was satisfactory or better in 28 of the 29 lessons, including 13 where it was good and one where it was very good. It was unsatisfactory in one. Most pupils concentrated well in lessons and took some responsibility for their own learning. The progress of a small number of low-attaining pupils was slowed by their lack of maturity and weak basic skills;
 - the quality of teaching was satisfactory overall. It was satisfactory or better in 28 of the 29 lessons, including 14 where it was good and one where it was very good. It was unsatisfactory in one. In the best lessons, the teaching was lively, well paced and challenged the pupils. In several lessons which were broadly
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satisfactory, the teaching was dull and cautious, with the pupils expected to listen passively for too long;

- the school is an orderly environment. The pupils' attitudes and behaviour were satisfactory or better in 28 of the 29 lessons, including 15 where they were good and two where they were very good. The pupils' behaviour around the school was good and the pupils spoke warmly about the improvements made to the school;
 - attendance remains too low. However, the school is taking effective action to improve it, and the support provided by the local education authority's (LEA) attendance improvement service is good. Punctuality has improved markedly and is satisfactory;
 - the curriculum is satisfactory. At Key Stage 3, the subjects of the National Curriculum are taught for a suitable length of time. At Key Stage 4, the curriculum provides reasonable breadth and balance and includes access to a narrow range of vocational GCSE courses. A small number of pupils follow an alternative work-related curriculum;
 - the school has established a sound framework for assessing, recording and reporting on the pupils' progress. Information about the pupils' prior attainment is used to set realistic and challenging targets. Teachers use assessment information to guide their medium-term planning, but too few use it to plan individual lessons;
 - the provision for the pupils who have a Statement of Special Educational Need is satisfactory. The provision for other pupils who have special educational needs is more variable. Not all lessons take enough account of the needs of different groups of pupils, including those who have been identified as gifted or talented;
 - the leadership provided by the headteacher is very good. He has articulated and shared a clear vision for the school that has built confidence and self-belief among the staff. He is well supported by a newly appointed and effective leadership team. Weaknesses in the quality of education have been tackled swiftly and determinedly. The leadership team has a good understanding of the action needed to keep improving and this is reflected in the school's development plan;
 - the governing body is committed and effective. It is well led and has a good understanding of its role. Financial management is sound;
 - the pupils' personal development is satisfactory. The pupils' spiritual and moral development is good. The school has a strong ethos that reflects its status as a voluntary aided catholic school;
 - links with the community have improved considerably and this aspect of the school's work is good. However, links with local and partner primary schools remain weak, particularly in terms of liaison over the curriculum;
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- the accommodation is satisfactory overall. The facilities for physical education outdoors remain poor. The majority of classrooms are well maintained and provide a suitable learning environment;
- the LEA has played a significant role in bringing about rapid improvement in the school. The link school improvement officer has been a pivotal figure in aiding the school's recovery. The LEA is committed to providing a good but appropriately diminishing level of support.

Key issues

6. In order to improve the pupils' quality of education further, the governors, headteacher, senior managers and staff need to:

- continue to improve the pupils' attendance;
- increase the amount of good teaching;
- ensure that pupils who have special educational needs, including those who are gifted and talented, are supported adequately in all lessons;
- strengthen curriculum links with partner primary schools.

Inspection findings

Standards achieved by the pupils

7. The pupils' standards of attainment are generally improving, although they remain below those expected nationally. The unvalidated results in the 2004 end-of-Key Stage 3 National Curriculum tests were similar to those of 2003, which were well above average compared with schools having a similar proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals. However, the proportion of pupils achieving Level 5 or above in science, 37 per cent, was considerably lower than in English or mathematics.

8. In the GCSE or equivalent examinations, 31 per cent of the pupils achieved five or more A* to C grades. This was similar to the pupils' results in 2003, which were above average compared to similar schools. However, the proportion of the pupils achieving five or more A* to G grades fell as did the proportion of pupils achieving at least one GCSE pass. This decline at Key Stage 4 was a consequence of the poor attendance of a small group of disaffected pupils.

9. Achievement is satisfactory and, overall, the pupils make satisfactory progress during their time at school, often performing better than expected. The pupils attained higher results in the 2004 National Curriculum tests and GCSE or equivalent examinations than had been predicted from their levels of prior attainment. In nearly all lessons, the pupils made satisfactory or better progress.

10. Standards in English are low but, in 2003, 51 per cent of the pupils achieved the expected Level 5 or above in the National Curriculum tests at the end of Key Stage 3. This

was well above average for similar schools and continued a significant rise which began in 2002. In addition, the proportion of the pupils achieving higher levels was well above the average for similar schools. The pupils' unvalidated results in 2004 were similar to those of 2003. At Key Stage 4, the proportion of pupils achieving an A* to C grade rose from 39 per cent in 2003 to 44 per cent in 2004.

11. In English lessons, standards were below those expected nationally, although in higher-attaining groups some pupils achieved standards at or above those expected for their age. Year 11 pupils wrote at length on biblical themes in a selection of poetry. Their writing was analytical and explored the close relationship between language and theme. In many cases, they made good use of quotations to exemplify their argument. When writing to argue, persuade or entertain, the pupils showed some sound knowledge of the features of these kinds of texts but too many, however, used a limited vocabulary and did not structure their work well enough.

12. In reading, some pupils read fluently, varying pitch and tone to generate interest. Others read with little intonation and struggled to work out unfamiliar complex words. Overall, the pupils' comprehension was adequate. They understood the texts that they read, but often on a superficial level and few pupils interpreted the texts to draw out subtle meaning. In speaking and listening, the pupils' responses were often brief and there were few formal opportunities for the pupils to develop their speaking and listening skills. When they were given opportunities, the pupils spoke enthusiastically and with confidence. They articulated views and opinions on a variety of subjects, giving elaborate reasons for their answers. They listened well to each other.

13. Standards in mathematics are low compared to all schools nationally. However, in 2003, the proportion of the pupils achieving the expected Level 5 in the end-of-Key Stage 3 National Curriculum tests was well above the average for similar schools. Twenty eight per cent of the pupils achieved the higher levels, which was also well above the average for similar schools. In 2004, the pupils' unvalidated results in the end-of-Key Stage 3 National Curriculum tests were similar to those of 2003, as was the proportion of the pupils achieving an A* to C grade, which was low.

14. In mathematics lessons, standards were below those expected nationally, although in higher-attaining groups many pupils achieved standards at or above those expected for their age. In Year 8, the pupils manipulated algebraic terms and identified each term of a bracketed operation, using specialist mathematical vocabulary to describe how they expanded and simplified the calculation. In a high-attaining Year 9 class, the pupils calculated using fractions. In Year 10, the pupils solved equations by trial and improvement both individually and in pairs.

15. The quality of learning was satisfactory. It was satisfactory or better in 28 of the 29 lessons, including 13 where it was good and one where it was very good. It was unsatisfactory in one. This is much better than at the time of the previous inspection when it was satisfactory or better in only around two thirds of the lessons.

16. Most pupils concentrated well in lessons and took some responsibility for their own learning. The pace of learning was satisfactory and work habits were adequately established. The pupils applied themselves conscientiously, often making an obvious physical or mental effort. They listened well but also responded enthusiastically when allowed to take a more

active part in lessons. In the best lessons, the pupils asked pertinent questions, listened attentively to the contributions of others, and evaluated their own work thoughtfully. Overall, additional adults were used effectively to support learning. In two cases, however, they did not take enough initiative and spent too much of the lesson sitting passively. Enough homework was set and on occasions was referred to during the course of the lessons.

17. The learning of a small number of pupils was slowed by their lack of maturity and weak basic skills. Most of these pupils had special educational needs and the teachers did not always ensure that they were well supported. In a small number of the higher-attaining classes, a few of the gifted and talented pupils finished work early and were not challenged enough.

The pupils' attitudes, values and personal development

18. The pupils' personal development is satisfactory. The school has a strong, caring ethos that reflects its status as a voluntary-aided catholic school. The pupils are cared for effectively and relationships between the teachers and the pupils are generally good. The school is an orderly community.

19. No pupil was permanently excluded in 2003-04. The number of pupil days lost to fixed-term exclusions fell to 118. There have been no fixed-term exclusions this term, but one pupil has been permanently excluded.

20. The pupils' attitudes and behaviour were satisfactory or better in 28 of the 29 lessons, including 15 where they were good and two where they were very good. In one lesson, the pupils' behaviour was markedly better than their attitudes; the pupils behaved well but lacked enthusiasm for the lesson. In the main, however, the pupils' attitudes were positive. Most enjoy coming to school and were properly equipped and smartly dressed. Their attitudes to their teachers and to each other were good. They were polite and friendly to visitors, as well as to each other. Behaviour around the school was good. The pupils moved sensibly in the corridors and stairwells and queued calmly in the dining hall at break and lunch time. They were supervised well when playing outdoors and left very little litter.

21. A large number of pupils have joined the school since September. These pupils were keen to talk about its improved reputation and spoke confidently about how well they had settled into their new school. A significant number of the other pupils also spoke warmly about the improvements made to the school since the appointment of the new headteacher, citing improvement in behaviour and the upgrading of facilities as positive developments.

22. Attendance remains too low. The action taken by the school and the LEA to improve the pupils' rate of attendance has not brought about enough improvement. However, there has been a recent but notable improvement in the quality of the support provided by the LEA's attendance improvement service. It is well led and its work is sharply focused. The school and the LEA have good plans for working together to tackle poor attendance. Punctuality has improved markedly and the pupils were rarely late to lessons.

23. The pupils' social development is satisfactory. The pupils are aware of social conventions and generally relate to each other well. Many take part in the growing range of extracurricular activities and in lessons they work productively together in groups. The pupils' moral development is good. They have a keen understanding of the difference between right and wrong, and many articulated their views passionately. The pupils' cultural

development is satisfactory. Many have a sound understanding of the traditions and customs of different peoples and recognise the value of living in a multi-cultural society. Too few, however, have a broad understanding of the cultural dimensions of society and some lack knowledge and understanding of the cultural opportunities that are available locally. The pupils' spiritual development is good. In religious education lessons, the pupils are given opportunities to reflect on their own and others' beliefs. Assemblies are purposeful and well conducted. Considerable emphasis is placed on developing the pupils' understanding of the catholic faith, and this commitment is reflected in the appointment of two senior managers to take responsibility for developing further the Christian ethos of the school.

24. There are good links with the local community. The school is used by a number of community groups after the end of the school day and at weekends. These community groups offer a range of activities, including sports and support for learning a language. They are attended by a large number of pupils and parents.

The quality of education

25. The quality of teaching was satisfactory. It was satisfactory or better in 28 of the 29 lessons, including 14 where it was good and one where it was very good. This is much better than at the time of the previous inspection, when a third of lessons were judged unsatisfactory or poor.

26. There were a number of strengths in the teaching. Learning objectives were clear and mostly well matched to the differing needs of the pupils. In a few lessons, the pupils who have special educational needs, including those who are gifted and talented, were not supported well enough. In some subjects, the teachers made good use of assessment information to plan the next steps in the pupils' learning, but this good practice is not widespread enough across the school. Marking was satisfactory. The pupils' work is seen regularly by the teachers and appropriate guidance is given on what they need to do to improve further. Increasingly, work is marked using National Curriculum sub-levels.

27. Overall, expectations of the pupils' achievement and work rate were suitably high and the teachers managed the pupils' behaviour well. In several lessons which were broadly satisfactory, the introductions to topics were too long and there were insufficient opportunities for discussion and debate. The pupils were expected to sit and listen for a lengthy period before completing uninspiring written work. Nevertheless, these examples of dull and cautious teaching were few compared to the lessons where the teaching was lively, well-paced and challenging.

28. The national Key Stage 3 strategy is well established and all of the teachers have received training. Key Stage 3 strategy consultants have worked with groups of teachers and individuals, providing guidance on, and support for, improving the quality of teaching. An effective programme of monitoring ensures that all of the teachers are observed regularly. This has given the school an accurate understanding of which teachers need most support and has helped to eradicate weaknesses in the teaching.

29. The curriculum is satisfactory. At Key Stage 3, the subjects of the National Curriculum are taught for a suitable amount of time. In Year 7, the pupils follow a partially integrated curriculum with a particular emphasis on literacy, and are taught by fewer teachers than the other pupils. This is helping to improve standards. At Key Stage 4, the curriculum

provides reasonable breadth and balance but with limited access to vocational GCSE courses in Year 11. A small number of pupils follow an alternative work-related curriculum.

30. The school has established a sound framework for assessing, recording and reporting on the pupils' progress. Information about the pupils' prior attainment is used to set realistic and challenging targets for the end of each key stage. The pupils' progress is monitored regularly and there are useful plans to increase the frequency of these checks. Teachers use assessment information to guide their medium-term planning but too few use it to plan individual lessons. Good practice exists in some subjects but it is not widespread enough.

31. The provision for the pupils who have a Statement of Special Educational Need is satisfactory. The provision for other pupils who have special educational needs is more variable. In a few lessons, some of the lower-attaining pupils struggle with their work and do not receive enough support. Some of the teachers have not received enough training in how to teach low-attaining pupils and pupils who have special educational needs; consequently they do not break down the work into small enough steps. A few have low expectations of the amount of work that the pupils can do. The school has identified its cohort of gifted and talented pupils but not enough has been done to ensure that lessons regularly consider their needs.

32. Accommodation and resources are satisfactory, with the exception of the outdoor physical education areas. Funding has been allocated to provide all-weather outdoor games facilities and this work is due to begin shortly. Weaknesses in library provision have been addressed and are now satisfactory. The school is in good repair. With few exceptions, the classrooms are clean and well maintained. In a few of the practical workshop areas, there is too much clutter and parts of the rooms are dirty and untidy. Most of the teachers have worked very hard to create a positive and welcoming learning environment and this is reflected in the improved attitudes and behaviour of the pupils.

Leadership and management

33. The leadership and management of the school are good. The leadership provided by the headteacher is very good. He has articulated and shared a clear vision for the school that has built confidence and self-belief among the staff. This has generated optimism and energy and morale is good. The staff and pupils speak positively about his strong leadership. He is well supported by a newly appointed and effective leadership team. The recent appointment of two deputy headteachers has helped to quicken the pace of improvement, particularly in relation to the pupils' attitudes and behaviour. The leadership team has a good understanding of the quality of education provided by the school. They work together in pairs, with each pair having oversight of an area of the school's work. This is an effective arrangement and each pair of senior managers has complementary strengths. As a result, weaknesses have been tackled swiftly and the leadership team has a good understanding of the action needed to keep improving.

34. The quality of middle management is satisfactory overall and in places it is good. The present arrangements for line-managing different parts of the school are sound and departments have been restructured into faculties. Two heads of year and one head of faculty are participating in a nationally recognised middle-management training programme. The arrangements for monitoring the work of the faculties and of individual teachers are good.

Consequently, the school has a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the teaching.

35. Communication in the school is good. A regular and suitably frequent cycle of meetings has been established and this helps to communicate and clarify policy. The headteacher regularly attends and leads the daily staff briefing. The school has invested in an extensive programme of staff training and has given all of the staff an opportunity to participate in the “investment in excellence” programme.

36. The governing body is committed and effective. It has an appropriate committee structure with well-defined terms of reference and its work is suitably organised. The minutes of meetings are clear. The chair of the governing body is fiercely committed to the success of the school, as are many other governors. Governors have worked hard to bring about improvements in governance, including through training and discussion with the LEA. Relationships between the teaching staff and the governors are good. There are no vacancies on the governing body.

37. Governors and the LEA have agreed a plan to repay the budget deficit. The in-year budget is managed carefully and serious thought has been given to the best way to manage the recent decline in the number of pupils on roll. The school has sound arrangements for monitoring in-year expenditure. Financial planning is sharply focused on priorities. Consequently, financial management is sound.

38. Links with the community have improved considerably and this aspect of the school’s work is good. Productive working relationships have been established with external statutory and voluntary agencies. The school is well represented on local community forums. However, links with local and partner primary schools remain weak, particularly in terms of liaison about the curriculum. Not all teachers have a good enough understanding of what the Year 7 pupils already know, can do and understand when they join the school.

39. The LEA has played a significant role in bringing about rapid improvement in the school. It was instrumental in appointing the new headteacher and arranged for the appointment of an experienced deputy headteacher. It has provided an intensive programme of support for the teachers, mostly through training led by Key Stage 3 consultants. In particular, the link school improvement officer has been a pivotal figure in aiding the school’s recovery and she has been well supported by senior officers in the LEA. The LEA is committed to providing a good but appropriately diminishing level of support for the school as it emerges from special measures.

Implementation of the action plan

40. The school has made reasonable progress overall in addressing the weaknesses identified in the inspection report of March 2003.

41. Actions taken to raise the standards achieved by the pupils have included booster and revision classes, alterations to the curriculum, a particular emphasis on literacy, and improvement in the way that assessment data is used to set targets and monitor the pupils’ progress. These have brought about rapid improvement in the standards achieved by the pupils.

42. The programme of observation of lessons has ensured that the senior managers have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the teaching across the school. This has enabled them to target support at the weakest teachers and the earlier widespread weaknesses in the teaching. Teachers have received good guidance on planning, teaching methods and on the assessment of pupils' work and progress. Teaching is generally satisfactory throughout the school.

43. The appointment of the new headteacher and his senior leadership team has been a significant factor in the school's improvement. In particular, the headteacher quickly won the confidence of the staff and pupils and injected optimism and self-belief into the school. The leadership and management of the school has been restructured and re-organised at all levels. Leadership and management are effective.

44. The reorganisation of the school day, together with a new system for monitoring lateness, has improved punctuality. The school is tackling problems with attendance imaginatively and with rigour, but with little success. The recent changes to the LEA's school attendance improvement service, and new arrangements for working with the school, provide a sound basis for future improvement.

Appendix – Information about the inspection

The school was inspected by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools in February 2003. The inspection was carried out under section 3 of the School Inspections Act 1996, which gives Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools the authority to cause any school to be inspected. The inspection was also deemed a section 10 inspection under the same Act. The inspection was critical of many aspects of the work of the school and, in accordance with that Act, the school was made subject to special measures because it was failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education.

The school was visited by HMI in September 2003, and in February and May 2004 to assess the progress it was making to implement its action plan and address the key issues in the inspection report of March 2003.

In September 2004, two HMI returned to inspect the school for two days. The inspection was carried out under section 3 of the School Inspections Act 1996.

Twenty nine lessons or parts of lessons, one assembly and two registration sessions were inspected. The pupils were observed at break and lunchtimes and samples of their work were inspected. Meetings were held with the headteacher, senior staff, a representative from the governing body and a representative from the LEA. A group of pupils was interviewed. Informal discussions were held with other staff and pupils. A wide range of the school's documentation was scrutinised. Account was also taken of the evidence from previous monitoring inspections.

The inspection assessed the quality of education provided and the progress the school has made, in particular in relation to the main findings and key issues in the inspection report of March 2003 and the action plan prepared by the governing body to address those key issues.