



St Ambrose College

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 131315
LEA Trafford
Inspection number 282195
Inspection dates 23 November 2005 to 24 November 2005
Reporting inspector Mr Leszek Iwaskow HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary	School address	Wicker Lane
School category	Voluntary aided		Halebarns
Age range of pupils	11 to 18		Altrincham, Cheshire WA15 0HE
Gender of pupils	Boys	Telephone number	0161 980 2711
Number on roll	839	Fax number	0161 980 2323
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair of governors	Mr Richard Broadbent
Date of previous inspection	4 December 2000	Headteacher	Mr M Thompson

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three additional inspectors.

Description of the school

St Ambrose College is a small Catholic Voluntary Aided boys' selective grammar school with a sixth form of 171 students. The college is oversubscribed. Boys are selected through the college's own entrance examination. Increasing numbers of boys come from other schools as the college increases in popularity. The intake is predominantly white British with the level of free school meals well below the national average. Attainment on entry is well above the average covering the top 50% of the ability range. This is much broader than is usual for a grammar school intake. The college catchment area is large, with the majority of boys living outside the immediate locality and having to travel in each day. These boys also come from a wide range of backgrounds, including some of the poorest areas in Manchester. There is a traditionally strong academic ethos and both boys and parents have high expectations.

The college was, until recently, a long established Independent school, which changed to grant maintained status in 1997 and then came under local authority jurisdiction in 1999. This rapid transition was not without its problems and has resulted in the college, staff and boys having to adapt very quickly to integration into the national education system. These difficulties, including a large annual deficit budget and inadequate accommodation, were acknowledged in the last Ofsted inspection report. This has resulted in significant changes to the management structure as well as approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. This also coincided with a period of staff changes and a reliance on supply staff. Current staffing is now relatively stable. In September 2005 the college was designated as a maths and computing specialist school.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Inspectors agree that this is a good school and consider that, despite the real difficulties that the college has faced in recent years, it has shown good improvements since the last inspection. The boys attain high standards but make especially good progress in their personal development, which produces well rounded and caring young adults.

The college is well led and managed and has built up the capacity to improve even further. There is a real awareness of what needs to be done to move the college forward. Strengths and weaknesses have been accurately identified and the college has a clear programme of how to make things even better.

Teamwork is central to this process and effective teams are being established. However, there remains a need to ensure consistency of good practice across the whole college in all curriculum areas. In particular, the teaching must consistently match the potential of the boys.

Parents and boys are proud of the college's achievements, not just in the classroom but also on the sporting fields and through the work in the community. A caring ethos pervades the whole college philosophy and culture. Despite the poor accommodation, the college provides good value for money.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The sixth form is good overall. Examination results are well above the national average and students make good progress. Teaching and learning are good with some outstanding lessons. Personal development is a strong feature, with students taking responsibility for mentoring younger boys. Mutual respect and friendship are readily apparent. The quality of care is outstanding and the guidance students receive is a particular strength. The curriculum is fit for purpose and appreciated by students and their parents; enrichment opportunities are many and these are well supported. They make a very valuable contribution to raising students' understanding of the importance of being a good person and a good citizen. Students enjoy the sixth form and clearly benefit from the opportunities it provides. 'Leadership and management is good.

What the school should do to improve further

- Continue to develop teaching and learning by disseminating good practice to all areas of the college to engage boys and provide real challenge to support their learning.
- Continue to develop and make more effective use of assessment to inform boys about their progress and how they can improve.
- Ensure that all middle managers are effective in putting improvements into place across the whole curriculum to ensure it meets the needs of all boys.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Standards are good. Inspectors agree with the college's own evaluation that achievement is satisfactory for students aged 11 to 14, but that it is good in Years 10 and 11 and in the sixth form. As the college becomes more inclusive, attainment on entry is lower than in comparable schools, but the boys still perform well. At Key Stage 3 the majority of boys make satisfactory progress in core subjects; however, the college acknowledges that higher attaining boys would benefit from even greater challenge. It is taking robust action to raise achievement throughout the lower school and has clear strategies in place to deal with this issue.

The number of boys attaining A* to C grade passes at general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) remains high compared to the national average. However, there has been a slight decline in recent years, due partly to the decreasing attainment of these particular cohorts of boys on entry, but also because some curriculum areas are performing less well than others. The college is aware of where the issues lie and is working hard to provide greater consistency across all subjects. In particular, there is a recognition that the quality of coursework needs to be improved in order to raise achievement further.

The small numbers of boys with learning difficulties make good progress. This demonstrates the improvements put in place since the last inspection. The few minority ethnic pupils also flourish in the positive college environment, frequently outperforming their peers. All boys have high expectations of themselves and achieve well, despite the disruptions caused in recent years by the use of supply staff in some subject areas, and some teaching which has been less than challenging.

Progress in the sixth form is good and achievement at general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A-level) is a particular strength of the college. A-level results are very high compared to the national average although there is still some variation between subjects.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Boys enjoy college life immensely: camaraderie is the keynote. The pride shown by the college's sportsmen and their assertions about the, 'wonderful opportunities for travel through rugby' are examples of the general positive feeling held by many boys. Keenness is reflected in the outstanding levels of attendance. Behaviour is good and bullying is rare. Sixth form students are confident, mature individuals who are well focused on their learning. Moreover, their care for younger boys is excellent. Attitudes are generally positive; lessons are enjoyed, but when teaching lacks a sense of ambition, boys shrink into their shells and enthusiasm is muted.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Faith is alive in daily life. It fires the moral and social behaviour of boys. Helping the local homeless or people in an African township is the common currency of boys' conversation. Boys

understand about healthy lifestyles and keeping safe. College meals are healthy and have created a desire among boys for even more fresh vegetables and salad. Participation in sport typifies their healthy education. The college council has made some improvements to college life, but at class level decision making is uneven. Boys rightly prize the chance to assume responsibility, with most acquiring good interpersonal skills that will benefit them in the work place and the world outside.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall, although there is much good teaching and a minority is outstanding. The most effective teaching reflects the well-focused training, monitoring and evaluation recently initiated in college. Senior managers are well aware of where teaching and learning is most effective and where further improvement is required.

Teachers have good subject knowledge, so boys and students gain

much from their expertise. They have built up good relationships with their classes and manage them firmly, frequently with good humour. Mutual respect pervades the classrooms. Many lessons are well planned, with teachers' clear presentation and summaries often complementing varied activities requiring learners to work independently, or with their peers. In such lessons, productivity is high and outcomes correspond to challenging targets. The boys thrive on opportunities to be creative both in thought and in practical ways. Where learning is predominantly teacher led, or where the range of tasks and questioning is too limited, boys have insufficient opportunity to learn actively for themselves, become passive learners and less motivated.

The use of assessment to aid learning has much improved recently and is now satisfactory. Teachers regularly set challenging targets reflecting National Curriculum levels and external examination grades. In several subjects, these contribute well to the good progress boys make. In a few subjects, however, teachers do not all take full advantage of this important source of motivation.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum has recently undergone substantial revision and is now good. It fulfils statutory requirements, has acquired a better balance and is sufficiently broad and varied to meet the needs of all boys. Numeracy is well catered for and most subjects contribute significantly to literacy and information and communication technology (ICT). The college caters adequately for its most able boys and well for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Good use is made of time, staffing and resources to provide a sufficient range of subjects in Years 7-9. A good choice of GCSE and A-level courses reflects boys' academic and vocational aspirations and their parents' preferences for 'traditional' subjects. Attempts to provide even greater choice have often been less enthusiastically received by parents. There is sufficient flexibility in the curriculum to specialise in languages, humanities and science. While design and technology has benefited from some new accommodation, limited space prevents all aspects being taught. The college currently has no access to suitable accommodation for the study of food technology. Citizenship and work related learning are well provided for in many lessons and extra-curricular contexts. The curriculum is also very well enriched with numerous sporting, cultural and other activities enjoyed by many boys and talked about throughout the week.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

This is good. The college provides first-rate care despite the shortcomings in accommodation and resources. Boys appreciate that resources are limited and react excitedly when these are improved. One boy heralded the recent arrival of the new computers by saying, 'this college is now wicked'. Arrangements for child protection are in place and followed well. Boys can and do confide in sixth formers. This, with rigorous risk assessments, helps to ensure that they are safe and well cared for. Parents and the college are good partners. The leading role played by boys in parent consultations is innovative and provides effective guidance.

Support for learning is generally good; those who find learning hard or who have a disability make good progress. However, some higher attaining boys in Years 7 to 9 lack the quality of support that would guarantee best progress. There are suitable academic targets for all boys, but boys rightly judge that support to help achieve them is not consistently good across the college. Guidance about work is effective, but not all subjects provide a work related emphasis.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Leadership and management are good overall, including in the sixth form. The headteacher has managed the transition from the independent into the state sector effectively. This has meant making some difficult and, at times, unpopular decisions, in order to enable the college to move forward and be able to provide an education that is both relevant to the boys and which meets National Curriculum requirements. These changes have not compromised the high academic standards that the boys continue to achieve.

The headteacher provides very good leadership and works very well with his senior staff who are developing into an effective team. Governors provide good support, are knowledgeable about the college, and are well aware of strengths and areas that need improving. There is a collective vision that retains the Catholic ethos and strong

emphasis on care that pervades the whole college and incorporates this into looking and reaching outwards to prepare the boys for life beyond the college.

The college has acknowledged the need to change and has made good progress since the last inspection, particularly in ensuring that it meets statutory requirements, in the delegation of responsibilities and the development of management roles. Middle management teams are now taking a more active role in developing their curriculum areas, although some are making more significant progress than others. There were some problems in recruiting suitable teachers in some subjects and, in those cases, this did delay improvements.

The college now manages its budget effectively and managers take prudent care of limited resources. However, the quality of the inherited accommodation remains unsatisfactory and makes it impossible to deliver certain aspects of the curriculum. The college is continuing to make every attempt to seek out funding for new buildings and improvement.

The college is well respected in the local community both for the caring and thoughtful attitude of the boys, and the links that are being fostered with residents, other church groups and organisations. A great deal of effort is being put into involving all stakeholders, including parents and boys, in developing a greater sense of community. Everyone is encouraged to contribute more actively in improving the learning and spiritual environment. The college has built up the capacity to improve in those areas in need of most attention and to continue to flourish as a caring and learning community.

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Inspection judgements

<i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate</i>	School Overall	16-19
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	2	2
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2	2
The quality and standards in foundation stage	NA	NA
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	Yes	Yes
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	1
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The attendance of learners	1	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	2

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2	
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets, through quality assurance and self-review	2	
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources are deployed to achieve value for money	2	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	
The adequacy and suitability of staff to ensure that learners are protected	Yes	Yes

The extent to which schools enable learners to be healthy	
Learners are encouraged and enabled to eat and drink healthily	Yes
Learners are encouraged and enabled to take regular exercise	Yes
Learners are discouraged from smoking and substance abuse	Yes
Learners are educated about sexual health	Yes
The extent to which providers ensure that learners stay safe	
Procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements	Yes
Risk assessment procedures and related staff training are in place	Yes
Action is taken to reduce anti-social behaviour, such as bullying and racism	Yes
Learners are taught about key risks and how to deal with them	Yes
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution	
Learners are helped to develop stable, positive relationships	Yes
Learners, individually and collectively, participate in making decisions that affect them	Yes
Learners are encouraged to initiate, participate in and manage activities in school and the wider community	Yes
The extent to which schools enable learners to achieve economic well-being	
There is provision to promote learners' basic skills	Yes
Learners have opportunities to develop enterprise skills and work in teams	Yes
Careers education and guidance is provided to all learners in key stage 3 and 4 and the sixth form	Yes
Education for all learners aged 14–19 provides an understanding of employment and the economy	Yes

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

This letter is to tell you about our recent visit to your college to inspect the quality of the education you are experiencing. We particularly enjoyed meeting you and talking about lessons and the many activities you are involved in. What you had to tell us was very valuable and helped us come to the decision that your college is good and has improved in many respects over the last five years.

We are very aware that the buildings you work in are old and cramped and at times this makes learning difficult. However, you rise to the challenges admirably and don't let this deter you. Most of you make the very best of your opportunities by gaining good results in your examinations. We were very impressed by your maturity and potential. We particularly enjoyed listening to your stories about your real interest in sport, keeping healthy and the work you do to help each other and in the community. Your prowess on the sports field benefits you greatly and you do well especially when cheered on by groups of enthusiastic parents.

You find college fun and appear to be enjoying it immensely. We noted that you prefer lessons where you are actively involved interacting with the teacher and each other. You like finding out and discovering things for yourselves and we feel that you have the maturity to do this successfully. We have passed on your preferences to teachers and have asked them to think how they can make your lessons even more challenging and enjoyable. We particularly liked the idea that, in joint consultations with your parents and teachers, you take the lead in setting your own targets to improve. It would benefit you greatly if you got even more regular feedback on how you were doing and were given the time to reflect and act on this. Your teachers intend to use the year and college councils more effectively to help you share more fully in making the college an even better place to develop and learn in.