

St Mary's Catholic College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	105110
Local Authority	Wirral
Inspection number	287127
Inspection date	16 May 2007
Reporting inspector	Ian Thompson

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1475
6th form	252
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Canon B Hoban
Headteacher	Mr Paul Heitzman
Date of previous school inspection	4 March 2002
School address	Wallasey Village Wallasey Merseyside CH45 3LN
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

This larger than average school is a specialist performing arts college serving a wide catchment area. Almost half of the students come from areas of considerable social and economic disadvantage. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is double the national average: in the sixth form the proportion is four times greater than the national figure. Students' standards on entry to the school are below average with a much smaller than usual proportion of higher attainers. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is above average as is the proportion with a statement of special educational need. There are fewer than usual students from minority ethnic backgrounds with no groups of significant size. None is at an early stage of learning English.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

This is an outstanding school that has taken full advantage of its specialist status to provide an excellent service to its students and the community. Students of all levels of capability make exceptional progress through the school and achieve outstandingly well because they are provided with excellent support together with high quality teaching of a first rate curriculum. Parents refer to 'fantastic pastoral care'. Standards by the end of Year 11 are above average and rising. Students' high and increasing rate of progress put the school in the top 5% of schools nationally in 2006.

Outstanding leadership has developed a school in which all are valued and encouraged to do their best. The purposeful learning atmosphere in the school is impressive. Students enjoy coming to school because lessons are interesting and they feel valued. The school has gained the support of the great majority of parents: a typical comment being, 'St Mary's is a wonderful place for children to feel safe and learn.' Nevertheless, the school's leadership and governors monitor its performance closely and are committed to continuous improvement. The school provides excellent value for money.

Something that the school does outstandingly well is to promote students' personal development and this is the key factor in how well they do. All aspects of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are outstanding. Parents and students comment on how well the school gives them confidence in themselves. This is partly through the opportunities for expression and exploration that flow from the school's performing arts specialism but also has much to do with the mutual respect between students and their teachers. Students have a voice in the school that they are confident is heard. Teachers and classroom assistants work very well together to provide a high level of individual support that promotes progress. Students say 'teachers encourage us and we support each other'. The school prepares students well for their life after school or the next stage of their education.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 1

The outstanding sixth form provides opportunities for all who wish to extend their education. A high proportion of students stay on into the sixth form because the excellent curriculum is designed to meet their needs and aspirations. First rate management of the sixth form ensures that students receive high quality guidance and support. These, together with high quality teaching, are major factors in enabling them to complete their courses successfully, as the 100% pass rate for vocational courses and the school's high progress measure for A level courses show.

What the school should do to improve further

The school's well developed systems for evaluating its performance mean that all matters for improvement are already clearly identified in improvement planning.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Students make exceptional progress throughout the school in relation to their starting points when they join the school and when they begin GCSE and sixth form courses. Students start Year 7 with below average standards and finish Year 11 with above average standards; this represents outstanding progress. Standards show continuous improvement. The rate of progress that students make has increased consistently over recent years. Standards are broadly average by the end of Year 9 and above average at the end of Year 11. In national tests at the end of Year 9 in 2006 results for English were above average, close to average in mathematics and below average in science. The school has identified the reasons for lower performance in science and is tackling them successfully. Girls attained higher scores overall than boys but the gender gap was smaller than the national figure. GCSE results have also shown continuous improvement. Results for the award of five or more grades at A* to C were close to average in 2006 but with a lower than average proportion of the highest grades, which reflects the school's intake of a much lower than usual proportion of higher attaining students. However, results for five or more grades at A* to G were significantly above average, demonstrating that the majority of pupils achieve really well. Results in the arts subject are among the best, reflecting the impact of the school's specialist status. Very few pupils finish Key Stage 4 without any qualification.

Students enter the open access sixth form with fewer of the highest GCSE grades than normally found. They make excellent progress in relation to their lower than average prior attainment. Progress measures for sixth form students are consistently the best in the local authority and among the highest in the surrounding area. Pass grade results in AS examinations were above average in 2006 and there was a 100% pass rate on vocational courses. A level results were broadly average with a 100% pass rate in the majority of subjects.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Students' personal development and well-being, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, is outstanding. The school's specialist arts status has had a particularly marked effect upon students' excellent cultural development, as can be seen in high quality expressive work around the school. Strong spiritual development is promoted both through inspirational assemblies that reflect the school's values and the many opportunities students have for expression and reflection. As a result students develop positive relationships with their peers and with teachers. They are confident in discussing their ideas and respect the opinions and work of others. A striking feature of many lessons is the way that students support each other as a result of the school's emphasis on developing harmonious relationships. They show pride in their work. Behaviour is exemplary and the great majority of students show very positive attitudes to all aspects of school life. They say that they feel safe in school and are confident that any bullying, which is rare, will be dealt with swiftly and effectively. The school's very good promotion of service to the wider community results in students showing a keen awareness of the needs of others. They do much to support a number of charities, for example, and sixth formers support younger students in a variety of activities. Students' learn safe working habits. Their very good understanding of how to live healthy lifestyles is shown by their participation

in a range of extra-curricular sporting activities and the way that the school council has been active in helping to promote healthy eating. Workplace skills are developed well by the vocational aspects of the curriculum together with a focus on key skills across the school. Attendance is broadly average.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The excellent quality of teaching and learning stems from a number of key factors. Teachers know their subjects well and are able to plan interesting lessons that are well matched to students needs. Students respond well to mutually respectful relationships and teachers' consistent expectation of work and behaviour. Consequently, they are well motivated and time in lessons is used to the full. Lots of work in pairs or in groups enables students to support each other. Teachers are good at telling students exactly what they are expected to learn. The use of a wide variety of activities supports learning by maintaining pace and interest. In the best lessons teachers build well upon students' answers to searching questions to stretch them and make them think. Teachers build students' confidence by preparing them well for tests and examinations. Assessment data are used effectively for planning. Clear targets mean that students know how well they are doing and how well they should be doing. Consequently, they know what they need to do to improve and this is reinforced by classroom displays. Sensitive and focused support by teaching assistants contributes much to the outstanding progress of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The curriculum provides exceptionally well for students' needs and aspirations. In its breadth, balance and organisation it provides an excellent framework for students' academic and personal development. Provision for the development of key skills is very effective because it is planned across the curriculum. Team approaches planned among departments make clear links between subjects that help students make sense of their learning. The school's exceptional provision for the performing arts has had an impact across the curriculum. It does much to develop students' self-confidence and encourages them to work well together. The strong focus on community values developed by the school's leadership and governors means that there are many opportunities for students to learn by contributing and by taking on responsibilities. Students also have good opportunities for enterprise and the sixth form curriculum has a strong vocational element. Within this framework of outstanding provision, the school recognises the need for further development of work-related learning in the main school. A wide variety of extra-curricular activities provides enrichment, study support and very good opportunities for students to discover and develop interests and talents. Some 80% of the current Year 11 want to go into the sixth form, showing that the curriculum provides very well for students, many of whom otherwise might not continue in education.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The school provides excellent care, guidance and support for its students. Despite the size of the school, students feel that they are known and cared for because of the network of attachments that ensure that there is always someone for them to turn to. Safeguarding arrangements and risk assessments are in place as required. The school makes very good use of partnerships to meet the needs of the more vulnerable. Well developed academic guidance underpins the excellent progress students make through the school. The school's Bosco Centre (a permanently staffed support facility) does much to support students' emotional needs. It provides excellent welfare support for students at risk to help them progress personally and academically. Students appreciate the guidance they receive for careers and the next stage of their education. The high rate of course completion in the sixth form indicates the effectiveness of the guidance and support that students receive as does the fact that in 2006 about 60% of sixth formers went on to higher education.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The success of the school is the result of the way leadership has developed a common sense of purpose among staff with a focus on continuous improvement of standards. There is no complacency. Ambitious targets for improvement are set for departments, staff and students. The result is a school that provides high quality learning underpinned by high standards of care and support for all students whatever their abilities or needs. Consequently, students know that they are valued as individuals. The effectiveness of the school's leadership and governance is to be seen clearly in the astute management of the school's specialist status that has enhanced its provision and resources. The school discharges its wider responsibilities very well, particularly in the service it provides to its community that is based on a thorough assessment of needs. Partnerships with other schools and agencies are extremely well developed for the benefit of students. A strong feature of the school is the system for monitoring the quality of performance by both senior and middle managers. The result is a school that knows itself exceptionally well. Its realistic view of its performance accurately matches inspection findings. Development and planning reflect a clear view of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Governors play a full part in shaping the direction of the school and in maintaining its values. They are very well informed and able to hold the school to account for its performance while providing strong support. They understand the principles of best value and apply them effectively to decision making. The outstanding leadership of the headteacher and the senior managers, shown in the continuing improvement since the previous inspection, particularly in making the most of the opportunities provided by specialist status, gives the school an excellent capacity for further improvement.

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Annex A

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?	1	1
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	1
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes

Achievement and standards

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

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The behaviour of learners	1	
The attendance of learners	3	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	
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?	1	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	1

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

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1	
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	1	
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No	
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

Thank you very much for your courtesy and the way in which you welcomed us into your school. We enjoyed talking to you and seeing you at work. Many of you told us how good you think your school is. You are right to be proud of it because it is outstanding. You play a big part in making it so by your behaviour and attitudes. We were impressed by the way you work together and support each other.

There are many excellent aspects to your school because it is led and managed so well. The best things are:

- you receive first rate teaching that enables you to make exceptionally good progress
- you form excellent relationships with each other and your teachers
- you develop confidence in yourselves
- you make a strong contribution to the community
- the rich curriculum enables you to discover interests and talents and prepares you well for the future
- all adults in the school care for you and support you exceptionally well.

It is usual after an inspection to ask a school to do some things to improve its performance. However, we have not done so here because your headteacher and the staff have a very good understanding of what needs doing and already have plans for improvement.

Thank you for helping us with your work. We wish you well for the future and hope that you will continue to help making St Mary's such a good place to learn.