



# St Thomas Aquinas RC High School

## Inspection Report

**Unique Reference Number** 105574  
**Local Authority** Manchester  
**Inspection number** 287270  
**Inspection dates** 12–13 December 2006  
**Reporting inspector** Jane Austin HMI

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

<b>Type of school</b>	Secondary	<b>School address</b>	Nell Lane
<b>School category</b>	Voluntary aided		Chorlton-cum-Hardy, Manchester
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–16		Lancashire M21 7SW
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed	<b>Telephone number</b>	0161 8819448
<b>Number on roll (school)</b>	514	<b>Fax number</b>	0161 8820164
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body	<b>Chair</b>	Dr M Connor
		<b>Headteacher</b>	Mr E Wyllie
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	5 November 2001		

<b>Age group</b>	<b>Inspection dates</b>	<b>Inspection number</b>
11–16	12–13 December 2006	287270

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## Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two Additional Inspectors.

## Description of the school

St Thomas Aquinas RC High School is much smaller than average, with significantly more boys than girls on its roll. A very high proportion of students join and leave the school other than at the usual times. Students come from 19 different ethnic groups and 36 languages are spoken in the school. Approximately a third of the students do not speak English as their first language and are at the early stages of learning it. Almost half the students are of White British heritage: about a quarter come from Caribbean backgrounds, with those of Black African and Pakistani heritage forming significant minority groups. The school serves an area of very significant social and economic disadvantage and an exceptionally high percentage of students are eligible for free school meals. The proportion with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is well above average. The school has specialist status for English and the humanities.

The headteacher has been in post for a term and a half, having been associate headteacher prior to this appointment.

## Key for inspection grades

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

## Overall effectiveness of the school

### Grade: 3

St Thomas Aquinas RC High School provides its students with a satisfactory education. Students settle quickly when they move from their primary schools because they receive the help they need to make a smooth transition. Suitable support is provided for the large numbers of students who join the school other than at the beginning of Year 7. An appropriate balance of specialist language support and participation in subjects such as physical education (PE) helps students at the early stages of learning English to become part of the school community. The school cares well for its most vulnerable students. A notable feature of the school is the good relationships between students from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Students say they feel safe in school. Overall, students' personal development and behaviour is satisfactory. However, opportunities for students to take responsibility and contribute to the improvement of the school are limited. The school has worked hard and with considerable success to raise levels of attendance from a very low base. Nonetheless, these remain below average.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive suitable support and make satisfactory progress. The curriculum is satisfactory overall although programmes for citizenship, careers education and personal, social and health education (PSHE) are not embedded in Years 10 and 11.

Overall, students make satisfactory progress from their starting points. However, standards are very low at both key stages. At Key Stage 4 the proportion of students gaining five GCSE passes and one GCSE pass rose in 2006. In contrast there was a sharp decline in the percentage gaining at least five A\* to C grade passes. In the 2006 Key Stage 3 national tests and assessments students did not achieve well enough in mathematics, science and information and communication technology (ICT). Students are not developing their basic skills to the levels required to secure their future economic well being.

Leadership and management are satisfactory. The headteacher and senior team have responded to very disappointing examination and test results this year by setting a clear and purposeful agenda for raising standards. They have communicated this unequivocally to staff and students. The targets set are challenging and the strategies employed are focused and appropriate. Middle management has been restructured to match the school's needs and clear lines of accountability have been established. The governing body is beginning to hold the school to account. These factors indicate that the school's capacity to improve is satisfactory. Progress since the last inspection is satisfactory.

Although the school's overall effectiveness is satisfactory, its performance with regard to standards and attendance is inadequate. Before its next section 5 inspection Ofsted inspectors may visit the school to monitor the progress it has made in remedying these weaknesses. The school would receive two to five days notice of such a visit.

## What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards at Key Stage 4 and in mathematics, science and ICT at Key Stage 3
- Continue to improve attendance
- Ensure that the programmes for citizenship, careers education and PSHE are embedded at Key Stage 4.

## Achievement and standards

### Grade: 3

Overall, standards are very low. The provisional results for the 2006 Key Stage 3 national tests show a sharp fall in standards in mathematics and science. Only 41% of students reached the expected level for their age in mathematics, with 25% attaining this level in science. Results in English remained steady at 50%, well below the national average. Key Stage 3 assessments show that standards in ICT are very low. The school did not meet its targets. The school's analysis of the results, taking into account the significant proportion of students who join the school other than at the usual time, indicates that students made satisfactory progress in English. However, progress was inadequate in mathematics and science.

In 2006, at Key Stage 4 the proportion of students gaining five or more A\* to C grades at GCSE declined markedly to 21%, which is below the national floor targets. However, the percentage of students gaining five GCSE passes and one GCSE pass rose, continuing the upward trend of the last three years. Performance in the school's specialist areas of English and the humanities was variable. While results in English language and history remained steady at well below average, they fell considerably in English literature and geography from above to well below average. Overall students, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, made satisfactory progress from their starting points.

Poor performance in the 2006 external examinations and tests alerted the school to flaws in its systems for tracking students' progress. The recently revised procedures are well conceived. Challenging targets have been set for each student and their progress towards these has begun to be charted systematically. The effectiveness of this is, however, dependent on the consistent accuracy of assessments by staff, an area the school is working to improve. Appropriate measures to support students who are falling behind have been initiated.

## Personal development and well-being

### Grade: 3

Students' personal development and well-being are satisfactory. Assemblies reflect the Catholic ethos of the school and make a good contribution to students' satisfactory spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. However, there are missed opportunities to foster these aspects in registration sessions. The good relationships between students from different cultural and ethnic groups are a notably positive

feature. Students say they feel safe and do not judge bullying or racism to be a problem in the school. Behaviour around school is satisfactory. Students move around the building sensibly. Most pay good attention during lessons but lapses in concentration and behaviour on the part of a minority impede learning in some classes. Students enjoy and prefer those lessons in which they are busy and actively engaged in a range of tasks. They also enjoy the opportunities they have to go on educational trips and visits. The students' development of a healthy lifestyle is satisfactory, with about one in five regularly engaged in the range of extra-curricular sporting activities the school provides. PE lessons are helping the students to develop a better understanding of the importance of a healthy diet, an importance reflected in the choice of food available in the school canteen. The school council provides a suitable forum for issues to be discussed and presented to school leaders: there are appropriate plans to canvass the students' opinions on a wider range of school related matters. Students help the wider community through fund-raising for charity, but opportunities to contribute to other aspects of school life are limited. Attendance is below average but has improved significantly in recent years because of new, rigorous procedures that are robustly led and managed. The students' development of skills to support their future economic well-being is inadequate overall. Too many fail to acquire the levels of skills and competencies in numeracy and ICT required in the work-place.

## **Quality of provision**

### **Teaching and learning**

#### **Grade: 3**

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory overall. School leaders are using robust lesson observation procedures to achieve more consistency in teaching through a better emphasis on improving standards. Lesson planning is now consistently based on clear learning objectives related to the subject's assessment requirements. Teachers are using assessment criteria, expressed in accessible terms, to set targets and help the students understand how to improve. Many teachers are effectively raising the focus on achievement by displaying models of students' work as examples to emulate. In the better lessons the teachers' confidence in subject knowledge ensures good coverage of content. These lessons make good use of time to ensure a fast pace and a keen interest. Questions and answer sessions are focused on learning aims and engage a good range of responses from most students. Relationships are good and the students respond positively to the teachers' frequent use of praise. In less effective lessons the pace of learning is too slow. The lack of variety and challenge in the activities set and the questions asked reduces the students' interest levels and concentration. As a result they do not work hard enough and some low level disruptive behaviour emerges which hinders learning further. There is too much variation in marking. The best accurately grades work and provides clear comments about what has been done well and what needs to improve. This quality is not consistently embedded. In some books much of the work is left unmarked while others lack constructive feedback and comments.

## **Curriculum and other activities**

### **Grade: 3**

The school provides a satisfactory curriculum. Students in Years 7, 8 and 9 follow a broad and balanced curriculum that meets their needs. There is recognition that many students arrive in the school with well below average attainment. The introduction of the 'Investors in Excellence' scheme helps such students to develop communication skills and gain in self-confidence.

At Key Stage 4 the curriculum is currently under development. The school recognises that at this point it lacks some important features, particularly with regard to citizenship and PSHE, and that the work-related dimension needs to be improved. There is no timetabled provision for a modern foreign language in Year 10 although students are able to access a language via special classes after the normal school day.

There are good links with the local college of further education: students enjoy the carousel system that allows them to experience taster sessions in a variety of vocational courses. Cooperation within the Manchester Catholic Education Partnership also allows curriculum enrichment for targeted students. The formal curriculum is enhanced by a suitable range of additional study support activities including revision classes to help students in Years 9 and 11 prepare for their examinations and tests. Students also take part enthusiastically in the additional music and sporting activities provided.

## **Care, guidance and support**

### **Grade: 3**

The school provides satisfactory care, guidance and support. Students are well-supported as they start at the school and the strong links with partner primary schools aid transition. The large numbers of students who join the school with a limited understanding of English receive good support from teachers within the school and also from a specialist teacher employed by the local authority. Those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have individual education plans with suitable targets and general strategies but without subject specific guidance.

The school recognises the need to raise standards and has introduced a thorough system for the setting of targets and evaluation that allows students to know how well they are doing and what they should aspire to achieve. Regular assessments and the monitoring of students' achievements prompt intervention where they are failing to reach their targets.

Satisfactory systems are in place to meet child protection requirements. Looked after children are seen as a priority: for example, those in Year 11 benefit from extra tuition delivered by an experienced and successful teacher. The school community police officer makes a valued contribution to students' safety. The Connexions service is effective in helping students prepare for the next stage of their education. There is, however, a need for improvement in the provision of timetabled careers education and there are some missed opportunities for the greater use of external resources.

## Leadership and management

### Grade: 3

The headteacher is providing a clear and secure sense of direction for the school. His determination and commitment to raising standards are shared by the senior team. Galvanised by the disappointing results this year, their accurate analysis of the problems has led to a sharp focus on four key priorities for improvement. Appropriate plans to deal with these are being implemented with a sense of urgency and vigour. As part of this, the responsibilities of middle managers have been reviewed and clarified better to match the school's needs. As a consequence, heads of faculty now have oversight of a number of aspects of the school's provision, although this development is at too early a stage to evaluate its effectiveness. Some progress has been made in creating a valuable link between the pastoral care and academic guidance of students through the roles of the new heads of lower and upper school.

The strongest emphasis has been placed on developing the skills of heads of department. They are being held more accountable for performance in their subjects, particularly through the revised procedures for setting students' targets and tracking their progress. Appropriate support for this is provided through regular coaching by senior staff and the local authority consultants. A particular focus of training for all staff is the accurate assessment of students' skills and understanding. Robust and systematic monitoring of teaching and learning is highlighting good practice and areas for development. These are being tackled systematically and rigorously. In seeking to remedy a marked fall in examination and test results, the focus on the school's specialist work has reduced.

Governance, under the very able leadership of the newly appointed chair, is satisfactory. Helpfully, the governing body has revised its working arrangements to focus sharply on evaluating the school's performance and providing the challenge demanded of its role. A number of recently appointed governors bring relevant experience to strengthen this aspect of the leadership of the school. The school gives satisfactory value for money. A plan agreed with the local authority is in place to repay a very large deficit.



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## Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	<b>School Overall</b>
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### Overall effectiveness

<b>How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?</b>	3
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes

### Achievement and standards

<b>How well do learners achieve?</b>	3
The standards <sup>1</sup> reached by learners	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	3

### Personal development and well-being

<b>How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?</b>	3
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3
The behaviour of learners	3
The attendance of learners	4
How well learners enjoy their education	3
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	3
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	4

### The quality of provision

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

<sup>1</sup> 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.

## Leadership and management

<b>How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?</b>	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	3
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	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 for making us welcome when we visited your school recently. Our particular thanks go to those of you we interviewed and spoke to about your work and aspects of school life.

We think your school provides you with a satisfactory education so you make the progress you are capable of. The school helps you to settle in, whether you join at the beginning of Year 7 or at a different point. Those of you who are at the early stages of learning English, or who experience difficulties learning, get the help you need. You told us you feel safe in school and that bullying and racism are not issues. We noticed the good relationships you have with one another, whatever ethnic or cultural background you come from. Most of you behave sensibly around the school. Your lessons are satisfactory. You enjoy them most when you are actively involved. When tasks are not so engaging you find it hard to concentrate and some of you disrupt lessons. This interferes with your learning and that of your classmates. You can make better progress by behaving well in every lesson.

We have asked your school to make some improvements.

- Standards need to rise particularly in mathematics, science and ICT. The levels you reach in these subjects are not high enough to help you do well when you leave school. You can make a difference by working as hard as possible to reach your targets.
- Attendance is not good enough. You can only do your best if you come to school punctually every day.
- Those of you in Years 10 and 11 would benefit from courses in citizenship and PSHE, including careers guidance.

We know you are proud of your school and hope you will play your part in improving it. We wish you every success in the future.