



St Thomas More Catholic School

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 108413
Local Authority Gateshead
Inspection number 288094
Inspection date 13 February 2007
Reporting inspector Margaret Farrow HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary	School address	Croftdale Road
School category	Voluntary aided		Blaydon-on-Tyne, Tyne and Wear
Age range of pupils	11–18		NE21 4BQ
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	0191 499 0111
Number on roll (school)	1497	Fax number	0191 414 1116
Number on roll (6th form)	299		
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair	Dr AL Gibson
		Headteacher	Mr Jonathan Parkinson
Date of previous school inspection	1 March 2003		

Age group	Inspection date	Inspection number
11–18	13 February 2007	288094

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Introduction

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

Description of the school

St Thomas More is a popular, oversubscribed comprehensive school, serving mainly the local Catholic community in West Gateshead, within Gateshead local authority. It is large when compared to other secondary schools nationally. The number of students on roll continues to rise. Nearly all students have English as their first language and come from White British backgrounds. The number of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below average as is the proportion of those entitled to free school meals. The school first achieved technology college status in 1993 and became a Beacon School in 2000. In 2004 it became a Leading Edge school as well as a Training School for initial teacher training. In December 2006 the school was awarded a second specialism in vocational education.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

St Thomas More is an outstanding and inclusive school. The school places great emphasis on creating a strong Christian nurturing environment in which all students' personal, academic, social and spiritual development is supported. This enables students to achieve the best that they can. A culture of high expectations is held amongst staff and students alike. The excellent pastoral programme and house structure provides the bedrock of the school's approach and they make a positive contribution to students' sense of well-being and self-esteem throughout their time in school. Students speak highly of the guidance and support they receive through this structure. It ensures that no student is left behind and all are supported to fully take part in the life of the school. Students 'work hard and play hard'.

This bedrock is underpinned by excellent relationships and mutual respect between students, and between staff and students. This enhances students' moral and social development as well as their achievement. Students have great pride in their school. They are very polite, friendly and respectful of each other, adults and visitors to school. They say they enjoy coming to school and show very positive attitudes to learning. As a result their attendance is higher than that found nationally and their behaviour is exemplary, both in lessons and around the school. Students at risk of disaffection are supported very well and consequently there are very few fixed-term or permanent exclusions. Students are exceptionally well prepared for later life through very good careers advice, strong links with the Connexions service, local industry, businesses and universities. As a result nearly all students leaving school enter employment, further/higher education or training.

The standards that students attain in all Key Stages are outstanding; as is their progress from the time they enter school to the time they leave. This is because of the high quality teaching, exceptional care, guidance and support, and the wide range of opportunities provided through the curriculum that is well matched to students' individual needs and aspirations. Staff invest heavily in individual support and guidance for students, and keep parents well informed of their progress. The vast majority of parents are very supportive of the school. The curriculum is enriched by a wide range of extra-curricular activities. Students speak positively about them and take up is high. Many activities and aspects of the curriculum promote students' physical health and support their good understanding of what they need to be healthy, enabling them to make very well informed personal lifestyle choices.

The school has invested heavily in assuring high quality teaching. Teaching and learning coaches, along with the senior management team regularly monitor its quality and provide support and training to continually improve practice. Regular assessment of students' learning is used well to inform them about the standard of their work and what they need to do to improve. This includes 10 weekly reviews of students' work where students are fully involved in the evaluation of their progress, review of targets and determination of future ones.

The leadership of the headteacher and senior management team is outstanding. The school had no issues to address following its last inspection but it was not complacent and has continued to focus on improvements in students' attainment, achievement and well-being. The school strives to continue to improve and is at the forefront of research, development and dissemination of best practice, particularly in teaching and learning.

Since the last inspection a new headteacher was appointed. He has been committed to building on the established strengths and excellent reputation of the school. He has developed his own style of leadership that is effectively involving the whole staff and governors in the school's ongoing development. The headteacher, admirably supported by the senior leadership team and highly effective governing body is well supported by staff, parents, carers and the local Catholic community. As a result, the school has outstanding capacity to continue to improve. The school's rigorous and regular self-evaluation processes ensure that it knows itself well and is constantly fine-tuning those areas where it knows it can do better. Consequently inspectors have not identified any further areas for improvement.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 1

The sixth form is extremely effective and is an integral part of the school. It provides learners with clear routes through a very good range of courses, academic and vocational. Learners speak extremely positively about choice, teaching, advice, assessment and the excellent range of extra-curricular activities on offer. They recognise that they get a good deal and would not want anything to be changed. They provide exemplary role models to younger students and support them regularly. Targets for subjects and courses are set well above national progression rates. The vast majority of learners are very successful and complete the courses they start in Year 12. Pass rates and the proportion of higher grades are impressive. They are exceeding well supported and prepared for their transition into higher education, employment or training.

What the school should do to improve further

- The school continually strives to improve and maintain excellence. This inspection has identified no significant areas for improvement.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The standards that students attain are outstanding. Students enter the school with standards that are generally above national averages and throughout their school careers they continue to attain results that are much higher than that found nationally. In 2006, 90% of students aged 14 attained Level 5 and above in statutory tests for English, mathematics and science and virtually all 16-year-old students achieved at

least five GCSEs or equivalent at grade A*-C. A higher proportion of students than found nationally achieved A*/A grades. The school exceeded its challenging 2006 targets across both key stages. The percentage of students achieving 5 good GCSE passes including English and mathematics in 2006 was 69%, and although slightly lower than the previous year's results, was still significantly above the national average. Standards in the sixth form are also well above average.

Students' progress is also outstanding. The school's analysis of 2006 results shows that students make much better progress than other students in comparable schools from their entry into the school aged 11 to their examinations at the age of 16. Within the context of high performing schools, their progress in English and mathematics is more average, despite the very high standards attained. The school's already completed module results for these two subjects indicate that results will rise significantly in 2007. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make the same excellent progress as other students; they nearly all leave year 11 with five good GCSE passes. This is because of the high quality support and guidance they receive. Sixth form learners and learners who pursue vocational courses also achieve well.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. They develop positive attitudes to cultural and religious diversity; for example through assemblies, religious education, pastoral lessons and supporting international charities such as CAFOD. The recent Catholic Mission in school has enhanced students' spiritual and moral development and their contribution to the local community, which is also outstanding. Students say they feel safe from racial harassment and bullying and they appreciate the robust procedures in operation to ensure their well-being. They say there are always people available to help them if they need support and believe this is a strength of the school. Students greatly enjoy opportunities to take responsibility and to represent their school and appreciate the fact that their opinions are listened to, particularly through the pastoral system. The developing year and sixth form forums are increasingly providing a means for taking more account of learners' comments and when appropriate, acting upon them.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The school has rigorous and well established procedures for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning. As a result, both are outstanding. The emphasis in lessons is the pace at which students are to learn effectively. Good lesson planning identifies a

wide range of activities to be undertaken in a short time. Teachers communicate clearly, have excellent relationships with their students, and keep them fully engaged. Students know what is expected of them and complete tasks quickly and confidently. Time is never wasted and the learning atmosphere in classrooms is excellent. Teachers use information and communication technology (ICT) well to present work to their classes in a compelling manner. They support the outstanding progress that their students make in lessons because they really interest them and always check that they have fully understood what they are studying.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The school provides an excellent curriculum. There are very secure pathways for students of all abilities in Years 7 to 13 to make outstanding progress in their academic studies and in their personal development. The school's high academic standards and the students' exemplary conduct and attitudes bear testimony to the inspiring and effective broad curriculum. All areas of the National Curriculum are covered well and, in addition, students benefit from an extremely wide range of extra-curricular activities. A very good mix of popular vocational and academic courses offers diversity and fully meets the needs and aspirations of students in Years 10 to 13. The school's two specialisms of technology and vocational education are making a positive difference; not only in terms of improving the range and variety of the curriculum, but also in students' attainment in those areas and their personal development.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The previous inspection indicated that this was an outstanding area and it remains so. The school continues to build upon its strengths. Excellent guidance is provided to support students' academic progress. Transition arrangements from feeder primary schools are particularly well managed. The outstanding work of house and pastoral tutors and the learning support department is enhanced by very good relationships with external agencies. This ensures that all students, including the most vulnerable, are supported well to enable them to make very good progress in their learning. This is a safe school. Child protection processes are in place and a serious misdemeanour policy is 'implemented with vigour'.

Risk assessments are fully in place and assuring the health and safety of the school community is an ongoing priority of all. An outstanding range of strategies are used to support and guide learners in the sixth form. These help to ensure that they leave school with the necessary skills and confidence to face the challenges of their lives ahead.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Well established and high quality systems for evaluating the success of the school and planning for further improvements are key strengths of leadership and management. Self-evaluation includes ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the school's aims, as well as pastoral and academic aspects. These processes ensure that senior managers, staff and governors, have a very clear understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement. Performance management arrangements are well established and used effectively to support school improvement priorities. Staff are increasingly empowered to take responsibility for their areas and supported by a significant programme of continual professional development opportunities. They work well together to share good practice and learn from each other. The school provides outstanding value for money. It deploys resources effectively and makes the best use of available accommodation, with a planned programme of refurbishment and renewal in place.

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	1	1
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	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
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	1	

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.

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

St Thomas More Catholic School

Croftdale Road

Blaydon-on-Tyne

Tyne and Wear

NE21 4BQ

14 February 2007

Dear Students

Thank you for making us so welcome when we visited your school recently. We were very impressed with your friendliness, helpfulness and maturity. We were able to visit some lessons and talk with a number of you, in meetings and around the school, to get a feel for what it is like to be a student in your school. I would also like to thank your parents and carers for completing the inspection questionnaire. We had over six hundred responses and an overwhelming majority of your families are very positive about the good quality of education and care you receive. Our inspection found that St Thomas More is an outstanding school. You enjoy school and attain high standards in your tests and examinations and make very good progress from the time you enter school to when you leave. We also found:

- your behaviour in and around school is exemplary. You show great respect and consideration towards each other and adults
- your headteacher and senior members of staff provide excellent leadership and all staff work hard to ensure you receive a high quality education
- the care, support and guidance you are given is outstanding and you strongly believe there are always people there to support you in times of need
- you value highly the wide range of extra activities that take part at lunch times and after school and you particularly like the annual visit to the cinema. You also value the pastoral system where you can debate, offer your own opinions and receive good advice and guidance
- the quality of teaching and learning and the curriculum you are provided with is outstanding and these help you to make excellent progress in lessons and in your tests and examinations. The 10 week review process, in which you are fully involved, ensures you know how well you are doing and what you need to do to improve
- you are very well prepared to move on in your education, training or employment when you leave school.

Once again, thank you for your help and making us so welcome. You are right to be proud of your school and you are great ambassadors for it. We wish you every success for the future.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Farrow HMI

Lead Inspector