



The Catholic High School, Chester a Specialist Science College

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 111449
Local Authority Cheshire
Inspection number 288963
Inspection date 18 September 2006
Reporting inspector Jon Lovgreen

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

Type of school	Secondary	School address	Old Wrexham Road
School category	Voluntary aided		Handbridge, Chester
Age range of pupils	11–18		Cheshire CH4 7HS
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01244 683473
Number on roll (school)	1010	Fax number	01244 681773
Number on roll (6th form)	189		
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair	Mr Peter Hussey
		Headteacher	Mr J Murray
Date of previous school inspection	10 February 2003		

Age group 11–18	Inspection date 18 September 2006	Inspection number 288963
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

The Catholic High School is of average size, drawing students from across Chester city and surrounding areas. It is popular and oversubscribed. The school has had specialist science college status for four years. The number of students with learning difficulties is average. The school is the designated centre for West Cheshire for students with autistic spectrum disorder. A past Beacon school, it also has Sportsmark, Artsmark and Investors in People awards. The past two years have seen significant changes of staff at a senior level.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

The Catholic High School is a good school with an outstanding sixth form. Whilst celebrating its successes it is well aware of areas that could be developed and has clear and well founded plans for improvement. Despite significant recent changes in senior management, there is a confidence and sense of purpose about the school. This is because ideas are discussed and shared thoroughly, and communication is good. Staff and students alike are clear what their responsibilities are, and both are committed to doing their best. This positive and purposeful approach helps limit the difficulties caused by the condition and suitability of the accommodation, some of which is poor and outdated. The headteacher and senior staff set a very good example of how to find time for individuals and their concerns, while making sure that major school issues are dealt with.

Most parents are very appreciative of what the school does, especially in terms of welcoming and integrating students, and accepting, cherishing and developing the individuality of each one. As one parent put it, 'Citizenship and community are not just words on a page here, they are lived out every day.' This stems from the very strong systems for supporting students both personally and educationally. As a result students feel secure, confident to express their views, and fully involved in what goes on.

Teachers have high expectations of what students can do and make these clear. Results in the end of Year 9 tests and at GCSE are above average, showing students to be making good progress in both key stages. Recent increases in the numbers leaving with five passes or at least one pass show how effectively students with learning difficulties are supported and taught. Higher-attaining students are doing well in the end of Year 9 tests but the school and inspectors agree that, with more precise guidance from subject teachers, there could be an increase in students attaining the very highest GCSE grades. Teaching is consistently good. Lessons are well planned, carefully matched to students' abilities, and presented in a lively way. Students respond well, because 'Teachers are on your side - always wanting what is best for you,' as one explained. The resulting high levels of attention and involvement which students show are a major factor in their good progress. Marking is thorough and, in Key Stage 4, relates to a very good tracking system. Students in Key Stage 3 have a general idea of the relative progress they are making in subjects, but are not sufficiently helped to relate this to the particular knowledge, skills and understanding they need to develop in each.

Students are proud of the school and loyal to it, as evidenced by their excellent behaviour both in lessons and around the extensive site. Different age groups mix well, and the role of sixth formers in acting as helpers and participants in so many school activities gives an excellent model of how to enjoy responsibility and opportunity. The curriculum is outstanding because of the way it has been developed to better match students' abilities and choices. Careful timetabling gives flexibility, and imaginative and valuable options including vocational courses are now available. The range of science options, including AS mathematics and physics modules in Key Stage

4, reflects how the school puts its specialist college status into practice. Excellent use of links with the local community for work experience, work-related courses, and mentoring further extend what is available. In a busy and well planned school day, the use teachers make of the morning form period is very variable, limiting its value for too many students.

Improved examination results, the quality and breadth of the school's evaluation, and the clarity of the focus on development put the school in a good position to improve further.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 1

The excellent sixth form is the epitome of all that the school does best. Starting with a strong induction programme to ensure that students are on the right course for them, all staff provide very high quality support. This enables students, who have a relatively wide range of ability on entry, to achieve very well, both academically and personally, and reach well above average standards. From the outset, due to high quality teaching, students are clear what they need to do and how to improve. They increasingly relish using their initiative and, from acting as supportive listeners to coaching sports teams, play a vibrant, highly active part in school life. Clear-sighted leadership, strong teamwork and very close monitoring of progress underpin the sixth form's success.

What the school should do to improve further

- Increase the proportion of students gaining the very highest grades at GCSE.
- Ensure that Key Stage 3 tracking systems consistently inform teaching and stimulate students' progress.
- Make sure that form tutors make more effective use of the morning form period.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 1

Students enter the school with average standards, though there are rather more at the two extremes of the ability range than is typical. After a period when results were consistent, but not rising with the national trend, the most recent results show improvements at both GCSE and in the end of Year 9 tests. These results show students to have made good progress. None left the school without some GCSE qualification. No groups underachieve but more students could gain the very highest A* and A grades. After being behind for several years, exam results in mathematics at all levels now match those in other subjects. At Key Stage 3 there was a rise in the number of students gaining the top grades. The school is well aware of the need to maintain this momentum in these two areas.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

During their time at the school, students mature into self-confident, thoughtful young adults. Attendance levels are satisfactory. The entrance hall mirror, in which all who pass see the diverse reflections of Christ as well as themselves, typifies the spirituality from which students' outstanding personal development stems. Highly-tuned moral awareness, exemplified by the Fair Trade and Eco-groups, underlies the great sense of community that pervades the school. Students' very good relationships with each other and adults ensure that they consider others' needs and, in the main, behave extremely well. Their cultural awareness is broadly based and celebrates diversity. Students enjoy school life, are keen participants in its activities and leave very well prepared for future life.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 1

Teaching and learning are good in the main school and outstanding in the sixth form. Classroom relationships are excellent, allowing energies to go towards learning rather than control. Students respond very well to carefully planned and interesting lessons. They appreciate the value of explaining and exploring ideas because teachers present ideas well and ask probing questions. Regular marking of work gives students a clear idea of what they do well and where they need to make improvements. At Key Stage 3 the way in which students' progress is assessed, tracked and discussed with them is too variable. Nonetheless, how students best learn and what they need to learn are well understood by teachers, who amend lessons accordingly and to good effect.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The curriculum is excellent, providing students of all abilities with a range and balance of experiences. The provision of various courses for science at GCSE, including three separate sciences and an AS science module for Key Stage 4 students, is a very good reflection of the school's specialist status. The expanding range of vocational options and alternative courses in Key Stage 4 is valuable in providing for students' differing abilities and ambitions. Careful timetabling makes sure that such options, and those involving flexible programmes on the three other linked sites, can be taken alongside GCSE courses. This flexibility is an important factor in motivating students. There are

numerous extra-curricular activities, much appreciated by students, who support them enthusiastically.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

High quality care, guidance and support for individuals are at the heart of the school's success. All staff take responsibility for students' well-being: as one said, 'it is made clear that we teach not just our subject but the child.' Rigorous, well planned procedures ensure child protection and health and safety. Parents and students alike praise the efforts taken to help newcomers settle. Older students appreciate the very good guidance they receive when choosing which subjects to study, always with an eye to their future aspirations. Nevertheless, some higher-attaining students on GCSE courses would benefit from clearer guidance on how to maximise their potential. Well targeted and very good teamwork ensures that students for whom English is an additional language and those who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities are helped to reach their potential. Students' confidence in the school's support mechanisms is very well placed. The inconsistent use of morning registration time by teachers is a missed opportunity in an otherwise almost exemplary picture.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 1

Good leadership and management is seeing the school through a period of significant change at senior level. There is a very clear vision of how the school can develop and this is well understood by staff at all levels because of good consultation and communication, and a philosophy of giving departments autonomy while holding them to account. This is a school that knows itself very well. Evaluation is regular, thorough and used effectively. Improvements in standards in mathematics at all levels demonstrate this. The emphasis on accelerating students' achievement is clear and agreed, and is increasingly bearing fruit. A strong feature is the clear commitment to giving all students the best possible opportunity to develop personally and academically. Governors are supportive, actively engaged in the school and constructively critical. Their careful oversight of staffing and employment matters is just one factor in the school being able to provide good value for money.

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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	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	2	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes

Achievement and standards

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

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2	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?	2	1
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	2	
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	2	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	
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

As you know we recently inspected your school and this is to tell you what we found.

First, thank you for being willing to talk so openly, honestly and sensibly about your experience of school. Your maturity, politeness and excellent behaviour were impressive.

The inspection found yours to be a good school with an outstanding sixth form. Exam results are good, and excellent in the sixth form. You make good progress because teachers have a clear idea of what you need to learn and work hard to put this across effectively. You respect this and respond by being keen, attentive and conscientious. Throughout the school your relationships with teachers and each other show care, trust and support. The result is a happy, good humoured atmosphere, which makes light of the poor, gloomy and outdated accommodation in parts of the school. The school is well led and managed so that things run very smoothly and there is ambition for success. You have a rich range of courses to choose from in Year 10 and in the sixth form and this helps to motivate you. Similarly, you are fortunate to have so many extra activities beyond lessons.

The school agrees with us that some things could be improved. More of you could gain the very highest A* and A grades at GCSE, especially if those of you who might be capable of this asked for more precise advice from teachers. Those of you in Years 7 to 9 need a clearer idea of your progress before national tests at the end of Year 9. Making sure that you understand the skills and ideas you need to learn, and comparing your progress with them, would help here. Finally, morning form time could be better used in many classes.

We are confident that you and your teachers will continue to work together for a better school. Our best wishes for your future.