

St John's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Comprehensive School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	114325
Local Authority	Durham
Inspection number	289878
Inspection dates	22–23 May 2007
Reporting inspector	Joe Clark

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1516
6th form	220
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Leo Robinson
Headteacher	Mr Frank O'Neill
Date of previous school inspection	1 September 2002
School address	Woodhouse Lane Bishop Auckland County Durham DL14 6JT
Telephone number	01388 603246
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Age group	11–18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by five Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

This is a larger than average school, which has Technology College status. It serves a mixed area but one that, overall, is socially and economically disadvantaged. The proportion of students entitled to free school meals is slightly above average. The vast majority of students are of White British heritage. A small number of Gypsy Roma students attend but this number is larger than in most schools. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is average. The school is a member of the Bishop Auckland Excellence cluster of three secondary and nine primary schools, part of the Excellence in Cities initiative. Attainment on entry is above average. The headteacher is currently on secondment to the local authority. The deputy headteacher is the acting headteacher.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good school with several outstanding features. It provides good value for money. Academic standards are well above average. Students achieve well because they are well taught and bring excellent attitudes to their work. Strong and effective leadership ensures that the school provides very well for the needs of students and sixth form students. The acting headteacher, supported by an effective senior leadership team and strong middle managers, is setting a clear direction for the future and there is good capacity for further improvement. The school's mission to be a 'Learning Community Guided by Gospel values' is exemplified in students' personal development, which is outstanding.

Students enjoy coming to school and their attendance is exceptionally good; their behaviour is excellent. Exclusions are very rare – none so far this year – and students with emotional and/or behavioural difficulties are given excellent support, particularly through 'The Arc' provision. Students feel safe in school. They are exceptionally well looked after and supported, personally and academically. Their understanding of the benefits of healthy eating and regular exercise is good. They make a positive contribution to the community and are very generous in their support for others less fortunate than themselves. They leave school with high academic standards, particularly in English, which, combined with their excellent attitudes and highly developed social skills provide a very positive platform for their future careers. Students' learning is underpinned by a good curriculum and good quality teaching. Some of the teaching seen during the inspection was outstanding; none was less than satisfactory.

The school knows itself well and takes swift and effective action when necessary; for example, when results dipped in 2005 due to disruption to the timetable and problems with accommodation during the school's refurbishment. Achievement in 2006 came back on track, as demonstrated by national test and GCSE results in Years 9 and 11. Currently, achievement in English is outstanding. Achievement in mathematics, although satisfactory, needs to be higher. Planning to bring this about is at an advanced stage. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and minority groups such as Gypsy Roma students receive good support and make good progress.

The school works well with local schools and institutions; for example, in developing joint sixth form courses with local secondary schools. Governance is good. Technology College status is improving resources for information and communication technology (ICT), which is having a positive impact through the greater and more effective use of new technology to support learning across the school. The school enjoys the overwhelming support of parents, who have great confidence in it. One parent's comments were typical of many: 'Both my children have attended St John's and have been happy and successful. St John's has encouraged and supported their academic progress and helped to nurture their development into confident and responsible young adults'.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 2

This is an effective sixth form, which provides good value for money. Examination results at advanced level in 2006 were well above average, a significant improvement on the previous year's results. Given students' attainment on entry to the sixth form, achievement is good. Current standards are well above average. The quality of teaching and learning is good. In the

best lessons, challenge, paired analysis of assessment criteria, timed writing under pressure and peer marking lead to good learning. Students are given clear guidance and evaluation of what marks are required to achieve each examination grade. The director and assistant director of the sixth form provide good leadership and management. Along with their tutor team, they provide a clear framework of support and guidance for students. The personal development and well-being of students are outstanding, as is the care, guidance and support that they receive. This is demonstrated by good retention rates and high levels of attendance and enjoyment. Over 90 students carry out voluntary lunch-time activities. Recent improvements in ICT resources have enabled students to work more independently. The laptop loan scheme is one example of how the school's use of ICT supports learning and enhances the future economic well-being of its students. The curriculum, especially for advanced level study, reflects students' needs and is wide ranging. More appropriate vocational provision is being developed in conjunction with local partners.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise achievement in mathematics.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students achieve well and by the end of Year 11, standards are well above average. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress, as do minority groups including Gypsy Roma children. GCSE and other examination results at the end of Year 11 were significantly above average in 2004 and 2006. In 2005, although results were still good, they dropped in comparison with the previous year. Results in 2006 were the best ever for the school and students' achievement was in the top 15% of schools in the country. Challenging targets, including Technology College targets, were exceeded. Evidence from the inspection shows that progress is good overall. Students do not achieve as well in mathematics as they do in English, however, because not as many reach the highest grades at GCSE. In 2006, for example, the proportion of students gaining the higher grades A* and A in mathematics was well below that for English.

Standards at the end of Year 9 are well above average. Students achieve well in Years 7 to 9. Results in national tests have been significantly above average overall in four of the last five years. In 2006, results were significantly above average in English, mathematics and science. Students achieved particularly well in English, results being in the top 20% for all schools. Standards in the sixth form are well above average and students achieve well.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The personal development of students and sixth form students is outstanding. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is excellent. Daily assemblies provide good opportunities for reflection and the development of spiritual awareness; for example, when linking the moral principles of famous people to the work of the Holy Spirit. Retreats and residential opportunities help students to develop social skills. Strong links through the Comenius project with schools in Holland and Denmark promote greater cultural awareness. As one of the few schools in the

North-East to benefit from the government's Cultural Hub initiative, students have the opportunity to appreciate the cultural heritage of the region through various art forms.

Students enjoy school. They mix together easily and confidently and behaviour is outstanding. Exclusions are very rare. Attendance is consistently well above average and there are very few unauthorised absences. Students are knowledgeable about the benefits of healthy eating and regular exercise and participate enthusiastically in a wide range of after-school sports. They make a good contribution to the school and local community and are very generous in raising money for good causes. The high quality of students' social skills and their well-developed basic skills in English, mathematics and ICT augur well for their future economic well-being. Parents value this aspect of the school's work. One parent summed this up in the comment: 'My children have been happy and safe. They are taught to make positive contributions to society and are supported to achieve.'

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The quality of teaching and learning throughout the school is good. Passionate, informed and rigorous teaching is a feature of the best lessons, some of which are outstanding. In these lessons, high expectations and challenging activities inspire students with confidence. Students understand the criteria by which their work is assessed and the overall process of learning is shared equally between students and teachers. Excellent relationships, mutual respect and high levels of independent learning were features of all good lessons. In lessons which are less successful, although satisfactory, work does not always match students' needs and activities are pitched at too low a level. Lesson plans sometimes do not give sufficient focus to what students will be expected to learn as a result of the teaching. The effective use of ICT, by students and teachers, supports learning in most subjects.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum provides a good range and balance of opportunities, contributing well to students' individual needs. It is reviewed annually and in consequence there are an increasing number of vocational courses to better meet the needs of learners. Strong support and guidance, based on prior performance data, enable students to access one of three Key Stage 4 learning pathways, ensuring successful outcomes, as evident in the 2006 GCSE results. Technology specialist status has broadened provision in Key Stage 4 and enhanced progression routes to post-16 and beyond. ICT is being used effectively to support learning throughout the school. The provision to support students' and sixth form students' personal development is a strength of the school, underpinned by the Catholic values. An extensive programme of well-attended, extra-curricular activities makes an outstanding contribution to students' physical and social development and is appreciated by parents, exemplified by the comment: 'My son has had some fantastic opportunities to take part in exciting and challenging extra-curricular activities.'

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The care, guidance and support of students are outstanding. Procedures for child protection and risk assessments are in place. Strong and effective support is provided by the chaplain, counsellor and student support coordinator. Students say that they feel safe. 'The Arc' in-house support services provide an outstanding and diverse range of support mechanisms that impact effectively on students' welfare. Group tutors are a pivotal link in the process of caring for students and guiding them in their academic work. Excellent partnerships with external agencies cater for those students needing additional support. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and minority groups, for example, Gypsy Roma children, are well supported. The use of the 'You Can' Centre has led to the reduction of exclusions; systems for the re-integration of students are particularly successful. Students have good access to career guidance. Transfer arrangements from primary schools are good and supportive. Systems for tracking students' progress against challenging targets are excellent.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Leadership and management are good. The strong and effective leadership shown by the headteacher and the acting headteacher has reversed the decline in achievement seen in 2005 and ensured that the improvement is being sustained. Excellent partnerships with the local authority, feeder primary schools and diocesan secondary schools, as well as the developing links with local secondary schools in Bishop Auckland, provide many benefits for students.

Current leadership has a clear and accurate view of what the school is doing well and where further improvement is needed; for example, in students' achievement in mathematics. Staffing difficulties are being tackled successfully through new appointments, some of which take effect from September. Through rigorous self-evaluation and monitoring systems, leaders at all levels set clear targets for improvement. These link in effectively to the school's improvement plan. Improvement since the previous inspection has been good, particularly in developing better tracking and monitoring systems. Parents have great confidence in the school and are pleased with the quality of education provided. A small minority feel their views are not canvassed enough. Governance is good. A major refurbishment programme is now complete and provides a good infra-structure to support students' progress, particularly in science, technology and ICT.

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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?	2	2
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	2
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	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	2
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?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The behaviour of learners	1	
The attendance of learners	1	
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	2	
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?	2	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?	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?	2	2
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	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

24 May 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of St John's RC Voluntary Aided Comprehensive School, Bishop Auckland, DL14 6JT

On behalf of the inspection team, I would like to thank you for making us feel so welcome on our recent visit. We greatly appreciated the time you spent talking to us and the help you gave us. We found you articulate and ambitious.

Yours is a good school. Many aspects are outstanding. Your spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is excellent. Your attitudes to learning, as well as your behaviour in lessons and around the school, are exceptionally good. The standards you achieve in your work are much higher than in most schools. You make good progress as you move through the school, especially in English. Whilst you achieve satisfactorily in mathematics, we think you can achieve as well as you do in English and we have asked the school to help you make better progress in this important subject. We are confident this will happen because yours is a school where the leadership of the headteacher and acting headteacher, supported by a good team of subject and pastoral leaders, is effective. They are making sure that when you leave St John's you have the best possible start to your future careers, whether in work or in further study.

Your teachers give up a great deal of time out of school to provide you with an excellent range of activities, especially in sport, and it is clear through your participation, and through your excellent attendance, that you greatly enjoy coming to St John's. You told us how much you value the support and encouragement you receive and how you feel lucky to be at such a good school. We agree with you.

So thank you once again for being so friendly and helpful and good luck for the future.

Yours faithfully

Joe Clark (Lead Inspector), Geoff Cooper, Elizabeth Gleave, Nigel Cromey-Hawke and Mary Sewell