



St Mark's West Essex Catholic School

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 115374
Local Authority ESSEX
Inspection number 290224
Inspection dates 22–23 November 2006
Reporting inspector Mark Phillips HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary	School address	Tripton Road
School category	Voluntary aided		Harlow
Age range of pupils	11–18		Essex CM18 6AA
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01279421267
Number on roll (school)	969	Fax number	01279418220
Number on roll (6th form)	210		
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair	Mr Thomas Austin
		Headteacher	Mr David Brunwin
Date of previous school inspection	29 January 2001		

Age group 11–18	Inspection dates 22–23 November 2006	Inspection number 290224
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

St Mark's West Essex Catholic School is an average sized voluntary-aided comprehensive school, with a sixth form of 210 students. It is located in the Toddbrook ward of Harlow. Numbers on roll have increased steadily since 1999, especially in the sixth form which has tripled in size in the past three years. The school is now heavily oversubscribed. The school has a slightly higher than average number of students from minority ethnic groups and students whose first language is not English. The number of students with learning difficulties and disabilities is broadly in line with national figures. The number of students known to be eligible for free school meals is lower than expected nationally, although the economic background of students is in line with the national average.

In September 2004 the school became a specialist business and enterprise school.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

St Mark's is a good school. It is a place where everyone is welcome. As a Year 11 pupil commented, 'the community is the best thing about this school - everyone gets on. It's a nice place to be.' The supportive environment that adults create in the school is matched by the responsible behaviour of students. Inspectors observed outstanding behaviour during lessons and this splendid attitude is an important reason why young people at St. Mark's make good progress.

When they join the school in Year 7, students' standards are broadly average. By the end of Key Stage 3, they have reached standards beyond national expectations and these standards are maintained to the end of Key Stage 4. This represents good progress during their time in the school.

Teaching is satisfactory overall. During the inspection it was encouraging to see some good and outstanding classroom practice, including that from teachers at the beginning of their careers. In these lessons, students showed much enjoyment because they were encouraged to work independently and because the pace of their learning was brisk. However, the reason why teaching is not better than satisfactory at the moment is because in a significant number of lessons teachers' expectations of students are rather limited and they do not develop students own thinking skills enough. Teachers do not make enough use of marking to help students understand what they need to do to improve their work. Nevertheless, in all lessons students showed a mature approach to their work and respect for their teachers.

In September 2004 St. Mark's became a specialist business and enterprise school. This provided a new challenge that has enabled the school to purchase additional information technology equipment and provide new courses for students throughout the school. Opportunities such as 'Young Enterprise' are growing, but there is scope for further development of these activities across the school curriculum and in the community.

The number of students attending St. Mark's has increased significantly since it was last inspected in 2001. Many more children apply than there are places and a significant number of students join the sixth form from other schools. Although extra accommodation has been created, further improvement is required to match the needs of learners and the demands of the curriculum, particularly in science.

The school has worked hard to welcome and accommodate extra students and at the same time raise standards and achievement in the school. Whilst the management team has a good knowledge of the school, the school recognises that it should review the way that school management and the governing body are organised to enable clearer lines of responsibility within a much larger community. This will enable St. Mark's to have a more precise view of its own strengths and weaknesses, and to move forward to further success.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Provision for sixth form students is good. Standards, particularly at AS level, are improving and are now broadly in line with the national average. Students make good progress, including those who join the sixth form from other schools. They are keen to learn, are taught mostly in small classes and develop good independent study skills through excellent relationships with staff. They have an increasingly wide mix of academic and vocational subjects to choose from. There is a good choice of extra-curricular activities but limited provision for physical education within lesson time. Good leadership by the head of sixth form ensures that students' good progress and outstanding personal development is closely monitored and promoted. Students appreciate the provision that is made for them including additional opportunities such as study visits to Barcelona and social ice-skating trips.

Sixth form students' personal development is outstanding. They contribute very well to the school and wider community by helping younger students, taking assemblies in the main school, and they run their own Young Enterprise companies to raise money for charities.

Students greatly enjoy being in the sixth form and make a significant contribution to the life of the school.

What the school should do to improve further

- Share good practice so that teaching becomes consistently effective throughout the school and promotes students' learning through better use of assessment and marking.
- Review the Key Stage 4 curriculum structure, particularly the arrangements for science.
- Develop and define areas of responsibility within the school's management to ensure that there is greater clarity in monitoring and evaluating school performance and improvement.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Achievement and standards are good. Standards are broadly average when students enter the school. By the end of Key Stage 3 standards are above national expectations. Students make good progress because of their outstanding personal development and the quality of the support they receive. Test results have remained high over the last three Years. In 2005 progress was greater in mathematics and science than in English. The school recognises this and has provided additional curriculum time for English at Key Stages 3 and 4.

By the end of Key Stage 4 standards remain generally above average. The percentage of students achieving 5 or more A* to C grades has been rising, reaching 71% in 2005.

In recent years up to 2005 the percentage of students gaining a high pass in English and mathematics has been increasing. However, in 2006 the overall pass rate fell slightly.

In 2005, GCSE standards were high in mathematics, and in single science which was taken by a higher proportion of students than nationally. Standards were exceptionally high in French although a significantly reduced number of students took modern foreign languages in Key Stage 4. Students reached high standards in Drama and PE but did not do so well in history and RE. Initial results from 2006 indicate that standards in Art & Design are improving rapidly and this was confirmed by work seen during the inspection.

Students with learning difficulties and disabilities progress as well as other students in the school.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Students' personal development and well-being are outstanding. They develop into mature and sensible young people and their wholehearted commitment to learning makes a significant contribution to their good achievement. Students are proud of their school and there is little that they would like to change. During the inspection, students behaved exceptionally well and were unfailingly polite. In lessons, students were attentive, listened carefully and willingly undertook the work set. Students say that bullying is very rare. Relationships are warm and mutually respectful and students of all ethnicities and faiths feel equally valued and welcome. Attendance is slightly above average and unauthorised absences are exceptionally low.

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. A calm and caring ethos runs throughout day-to-day school life and there are regular opportunities for students to be reflective. Tutor time and assemblies develop thought-provoking concepts such as self-respect and truth telling. Students also celebrate traditional events, such as Saints' days, Lent and Easter. Students' awareness of cultural diversity is also very good and students clearly value other faiths and their festivals. The extent to which students adopt safe and healthy lifestyles is good. Students in the main school and the sixth form make a good contribution to the school and local community. They raise funds for others who are experiencing particular difficulties and take part in both the school and Harlow Youth councils. Sixth form students also visit primary schools and act as peer mentors and buddies. Students' impressive personal qualities and good basic skills contribute well to their future economic well-being.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory. In all lessons, students are co-operative, willing to concentrate, and work hard as a result. They arrive at lessons motivated and ready to learn. Teaching assistants give good support to students with learning difficulties and disabilities.

In lessons that are good or better, challenging teaching ensures that students of all abilities are actively involved, developing confidence and independence in their learning. In an outstanding science practical lesson, Year 11 students learnt about the properties of enzymes that had them excited and enthusiastic to learn more. The teacher's high expectations encouraged the students to develop their own ideas and think for themselves.

In satisfactory lessons, teachers' expectations are not as high and the pace of work is slower. Students have fewer opportunities to think for themselves. Lessons have learning objectives, but these are sometimes too descriptive and teachers do not plan in enough detail for students of different abilities.

Across the school, the quality of marking is inconsistent. In the best instances, regular marking with constructive comments helps students to improve their work and regular monitoring of students' progress helps them towards their target grades. However, not all teachers are this thorough and in too many cases literacy errors are not corrected.

In the sixth form, teaching and learning are good. Teachers have good knowledge of their subjects, students are mature and responsive and they have good independent learning skills. They develop good research skills because of the guidance they receive from their teachers and their work is assessed well.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum and other activities are satisfactory. This is mainly because it meets most students' needs satisfactorily. All Year 7 students take two languages and there are good vocational courses on offer in Year 10 and 11. National Curriculum requirements in information technology (IT) are met. The Key Stage 4 option programme ensures that adequate provision in science is on offer and encouraged for all students. However, in practice, not enough of them opt into double science. The school provides well for reluctant learners through a basic skills programme and some students attend college locally. Careers guidance is good. All students follow a pioneering career planning programme and attend an Interview Day in Year 11 supported by over twenty employers. The school is developing good links with local

businesses through funding provided through specialist status. Many students form Young Enterprise companies to make and sell products such as Christmas decorations at a craft fair. There are effective team-building Enterprise Days in Years 9 and 10 but enterprise activities are not yet planned in subjects other than business studies.

The curriculum is enriched through after-school sports, music and drama clubs. Many students recently appeared in 'Godspell' and the weekly Music School is well-attended. Students value trips and visits organised by several subject departments. Students' outstanding personal development is aided by activities that develop citizenship, including the effective school council. However, students' citizenship skills are not formally assessed.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The pastoral system is good and students of all ages are well cared for. Parents surveyed during the inspection overwhelmingly agreed that their sons and daughters are safe and well cared for at the school. Most agreed that the school seeks the views of parents and carers and takes account of their suggestions and concerns. Day-to-day health and safety procedures are effective although some checks are due. Child protection procedures are in place. Students with learning difficulties and disabilities receive good support and close links with a wide range of external agencies provide effective support for vulnerable and disaffected students. Well-targeted support for students for whom English is an additional language helps them to make good progress in their learning. Students receive good support from the Connexions career service and comprehensive information about the options available in Years 10 and 11 and the sixth form. Academic support and guidance is given by tutors, and the heads of lower and upper school monitor the progress of individual students. Guidance in the sixth form is good, although there is quite a gap at the beginning of Year 12 before students find out their minimum target grades.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Led by the well-respected headteacher, the school management team has a good knowledge of the staff and students and promotes a high standard for students' well-being in the day-to-day running of the school. With the practical support of the governing body, the team has worked effectively to manage refurbishment or building of new accommodation within the confines of the school budget as the school has expanded. At the same time, the distinctive ethos and character of the school has been maintained, standards are higher, and student progress has improved. The school provides good value for money and has a good reputation locally. IT equipment has

increased, and there are now enough computers in the school to meet national expectations. This was a key area for improvement at the last inspection.

In joint lesson observations undertaken with inspectors, school leaders showed an accurate understanding and analysis of teaching and learning. Discussions about the quality of education revealed that managers analyse and interpret data, correctly identifying key issues for school improvement. However, because of the way that the management team is organised, common systems for monitoring and evaluating the school's performance are not precise enough. The school recognises that it should review the roles and responsibilities of school managers and governors now that the school is operating at full capacity. This includes involving all managers, including heads of department, more pro-actively in whole-school improvement issues and implementing common systems across the school for lesson observations, pupil tracking, and marking. The school has a sound capacity to improve in the future.

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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	2
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3	3
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	3
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	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
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?	3	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	2

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	2
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	3	
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2	
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	3	
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 November 2006

Dear Students

St. Mark's West Essex Catholic School, Tripton Road, Harlow, Essex. CM18 6AA

I am writing to you to let you know the results of the inspection that took place at your school in November.

When we visited St. Mark's, everyone made us feel very welcome. We were particularly taken by the friendliness and good manners of the students that we met and your behaviour during the inspection was outstanding. One of the most important reasons why you make good progress in your schoolwork, and why St. Mark's is a good school, is your positive attitude to learning and the way that you co-operate with each other to make the school such a harmonious community. This includes the sixth form, where students play an important part in school life as we saw in your very moving assembly about Stephen Lawrence.

There are some things that can be done at St. Mark's to improve the school further. We have asked Mr Brunwin and your teachers to make sure that

- your teachers share their ideas for good lessons with each other, so that all lessons are of the same high standard
- your work is marked more thoroughly, so that you know what you have to do to improve and earn higher grades
- there is a stronger emphasis on science for some students in Key Stage 4
- your senior teachers develop the ways that they watch and evaluate the work of the school.

We know that you will support your teachers as they work to make your school an even better place to learn in. Thank you very much for the important part that you played in this inspection, and good luck with your future studies and career plans.

Yours sincerely

Mark Phillips

Her Majesty's Inspector