

St Thomas Aquinas Catholic School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	103533
Local Authority	Birmingham
Inspection number	301297
Inspection dates	25–26 April 2007
Reporting inspector	Davinder Dosanjh HMI

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1044
6th form	220
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Laurence Docherty
Headteacher	J Foley
Date of previous school inspection	3 April 2007
School address	Wychall Lane Kings Norton Birmingham B38 8AP
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Age group	11–18
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

St Thomas Aquinas is an above average sized Catholic comprehensive school with a large sixth form. The majority of students are White British or Irish with small numbers from a range of different minority ethnic backgrounds. There are more boys than girls at the school. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is well above average. The proportion with learning difficulties and disabilities is below average. Approximately 46% of students in the sixth form qualify for the educational maintenance allowance. In September 2003 the school gained specialist status in mathematics and computing.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

St Thomas Aquinas Catholic School is a good school with some outstanding features. The key feature of the success of this school is the way in which the all-pervasive Catholic ethos has been developed and managed. This reflects well on the skills of all leaders. A cherished, family atmosphere provides a climate in which students know they are each a valued member of the school community. The school has outstanding partnerships with the local community.

The personal development and well-being of the students are outstanding. Behaviour and attendance are good. Students enjoy school and celebration of their success is a regular feature of school life. Many awards are presented in praise assemblies and students are recognised, for example, for being the 'most valued form member'. Students make an excellent contribution within the school and local community. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural aspects of students' personal development are outstanding. The school is a harmonious community and students have a very good awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity. The school creates a feeling of belonging and a strong sense of identity for students by events such as mission week.

The school is working hard to drive up standards after a decline in performance in 2004 and 2005. There was a clear improvement in 2006 when examination results at Key Stages 3 and 4 were above average. Students are making good progress as a result of effective intervention strategies targeting underachieving students. After poor information and communication technology (ICT) results, the school has put in place some key actions which have improved students' progress and standards.

Teaching and learning are good. There are some examples of outstanding practice where students know how to improve their performance and learning is challenging and exciting. Where teaching is less effective, these real strengths are not evident. There are some good examples of assessment practice in modern foreign languages, English and geography but practice is inconsistent across the school.

The good curriculum is broad with an increasing range of vocational courses to meet the needs of individual students. Students are offered an extensive range of enrichment activities which many take part in. Mathematics and computing specialist status has brought some benefits for students and the school. These benefits are particularly evident in improved resources and strong links and work with local primary schools. As yet the specialist status is not having a significant impact on the curriculum.

The school has a strong pastoral system which provides good care and support for students. Heads of year follow students all the way through the school and into the sixth form ensuring good continuity of care. Parents are very supportive of the school and speak highly of the care their sons and daughters receive, the opportunity to attend parent forums and the extra support provided during preparation for GCSE's.

Leadership and management of the school are good. The headteacher provides very effective leadership and is well supported by senior managers. Effective progress has been made in improving areas such as attendance, science and ICT. There is a strong focus on continually improving teaching and learning. The school recognises it needs to do more work on monitoring the impact of teaching on learning in lessons and extending the best practice in assessment. The school has a good capacity to improve further as indicated by the recent improvements in students' performance and their current progress.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Students make satisfactory progress while in the sixth form based on their GCSE results. Teaching is satisfactory overall. Insufficient focus on assessment and the development of examination skills prevent it from being better than this. However, there are some lessons which are much better. Progression from Year 11 is good with some 70% of students entering the sixth form. Sixth form students are excellent ambassadors for younger students and take on many responsibilities such as chair of the student council and supporting lower school students with literacy and numeracy. Nearly all students in Year 12 are involved in work with local feeder primary schools, for instance painting murals and organising and running modern foreign languages workshops. They are very positive about the support from teachers and personal tutors who they say 'go out of their way to help and genuinely care'. There is a real sense of community in the sixth form. The curriculum is broad and offers a good range of courses with some collaboration with local schools and colleges. The introduction of the morning tutorial is having an impact on improved attendance. There are regular reviews of academic progress but they are inconsistent and not always specific about how students can improve in different subjects. Leadership and management are satisfactory overall. The school is aware it needs to review the timing of AS level module examinations and the performance of some AS and A level courses.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that good assessment practice is used consistently so that all students know how to improve their work in all subjects.
- Improve achievement in the sixth form.
- Strengthen the monitoring of the impact of teaching on learning to develop the quality of learning.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Achievement and standards are good. The school has had an uneven pattern of performance with a decline in 2004 and 2005 although standards rose in 2006. Inspectors found accurate current data indicating further improvements. The school has also put in place effective intervention strategies targeting students who need additional support to achieve as well as they should.

Attainment on entry has been above average but declining over time. Standards at Key Stage 3 rose in 2006 with all core subjects being above the national average and English maintaining good performance over two years. Progress is good in English and improving in mathematics and science.

Standards at Key stage 4 have also improved. In 2006 the percentage of students gaining five or more higher A* to C grades increased to above the national average. Approximately half of the GCSE students achieved 5 or more A* to C grades including mathematics and English. The percentage of students achieving five or more A* to G grades at GCSE is very high. Results in ICT have been a concern but current progress is much better. Students make good progress in Key Stage 4 as a result of good teaching, intensive mentoring of any underachieving Year 11

students and extra revision lessons during the Easter break. Students with learning difficulties and disabilities are well supported and make good progress. While statutory targets have been met, specialist targets for ICT have not been achieved although effective action has been taken to improve this.

Students' progress in the sixth form is satisfactory overall. Results at AS level are below average, average at A level and good for vocational courses. There is significant variation in students' attainment in different subjects. Based on GCSE results, students generally achieve the grades expected, but a minority do not.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Students are proud of their school and enjoy coming to it. They say they feel safe in school and that account is taken of their point of view. Attendance has improved substantially over the last four years and is now good. Punctuality to lessons, a problem at the time of the last inspection, is now much better.

Students show a very positive attitude to learning. In most lessons they show high levels of attention and interest, working hard and remaining focused to the end. The school works hard to achieve high standards of behaviour. In most lessons and around the school behaviour is good. The number of fixed-term exclusions has reduced dramatically. In a small but significant number of lessons, however, pockets of misbehaviour still occur.

Students make an excellent contribution within the school and local community. They act as guides, subject ambassadors and prefects and enthusiastically support charity work. Many take part in an extensive Catholic outreach programme of Parish Masses which involves commitment in the evenings and at weekends. Students have an excellent understanding of the need for healthy lifestyles. They participate well in sporting activities and make healthy choices in the canteen.

The maturity of students in the spiritual, moral, social and cultural aspects of their personal development is outstanding. They respond very positively to the spiritual dimension of life. Awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity is evident from the harmonious atmosphere within the school and the value students give to all cultures. Preparation for students' economic well-being is good because of well organised work experience placements and good opportunities for business projects.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Teaching and learning are good overall in Key Stages 3 and 4 and satisfactory in the sixth form. In the best lessons teachers have an excellent understanding of students' knowledge at the start of the lesson and plan the work to extend that knowledge. Students know what they need to do to improve their performance and are set tasks to make the best progress. Teachers transmit their enthusiasm to the students and use teaching methods which stimulate learning. Students are encouraged to assess both their own work and those of their fellow students so

that the whole class works at maximum pace. In other lessons, the pace is not matched well enough to the students' abilities, who are thus not sufficiently challenged. The teacher's input is too long, allowing some students to be passive rather than active in their learning. The use of assessment in lessons is inconsistent. In some lessons, students know what their target grade is, but not what this means in knowledge or skill or how they can improve. ICT is not used imaginatively enough in many lessons. Students are comfortable cooperating and collaborating in groups. The positive relationships among students are used well to improve progress in many lessons but insufficient encouragement is given to younger students to work independently of adults.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Overall the curriculum is good in meeting the needs of students, including students in the sixth form. The school is effective in seeking ways of further improving its curriculum provision, such as the planned changes in Year 7. As yet the specialist status in mathematics and computing is not having a significant impact on the daily curriculum.

The school has developed better choices for the current Year 10 students so that they can each select a more appropriate pathway for their ability and aspirations. This increased choice has improved students' motivation. Further developments are planned to increase the number of vocational courses and good links are being made for progression with subjects in the sixth form. The sixth form offers a good range of advanced level and vocational courses. The new citizenship AS level and the combined religious education and communication studies course are proving popular with students. Appropriate subjects are offered in Years 7 to 9.

Close partnerships with other schools and the school's specialist status add to the good variety of enrichment activities which the school offers. These include visits, residential trips, special project days and after school clubs. Students' involvement in these activities is high. These activities contribute significantly to students' personal development.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Provision for students' care, guidance and support is good. Teachers and other members of staff work well together to promote students' well-being. The school has robust procedures to safeguard students and provides a safe and supportive environment for them. Transition arrangements from primary schools are very effective and identify students in need of extra support. The school works well with parents and outside agencies to meet students' needs. Because the school is systematic in its support for vulnerable students, these students make good progress in their learning.

Tutors contribute well to many aspects of students' personal development. Students particularly benefit from the effective use of tutorial time, with which they begin and end each day. Tutors, however, do not make sufficient use of the data available to them on students' academic progress, to guide them on how to improve their performance. Students receive effective careers guidance and sixth form students have a 'higher education week' in the summer term to support

them in making choices about what they will do next. Over 80% of students in Year 13 continue into higher education.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The headteacher plays a pivotal role in ensuring all staff are aware of what is expected of them, both in contributing to the school's sense of purpose and meeting demanding targets. He is well supported by a committed team of senior managers. Other leaders and managers appreciate their links with the senior team, knowing that their contribution to the development of the school is valued.

Performance is carefully monitored and key action taken when appropriate, for example to improve students' progress in ICT. Success has been achieved in improving attendance and implementing strategies to increase the examination results in science. The judgements of inspectors on the school's effectiveness align closely with the school's view of itself. While the school has good procedures for checking the quality of teaching and learning, it recognises, correctly, that it has more work to do developing its skills in evaluating learning in order to improve teaching. It also knows that there is a need to ensure greater consistency in matters such as assessment.

Governors have good knowledge of the school's work, supporting and promoting its work admirably. They do not have access to a wider pool of information and advice to underpin their work further in challenging what the school is saying and, as a result, their effectiveness is satisfactory rather than good. Money is spent wisely to raise standards and the school provides good value for money. Parents hold very positive views about the school. This school is held in high esteem by the local community, not least because of its extensive work with primary schools and its work for charities.

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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	3
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	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	3
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	2	
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	1	
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	3
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?	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.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	3
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	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

27 April 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of St Thomas Aquinas Catholic School, Birmingham, B38 8AP

We would like to thank you for making us so welcome on our recent inspection of your school. We were particularly impressed by the mature way you spoke with us. You should be pleased to hear that we found St Thomas Aquinas to be a good school with some outstanding features.

One of the main reasons for this is the Catholic spirit which runs throughout the school. Being a member of this school is like belonging to a family. Your comments on how teachers and tutors are so willing to help you say a great deal about the good quality of the education you are receiving. We were greatly impressed by the way in which the school does not let your successes go unnoticed.

You make an excellent contribution within the school and local community. Sixth form students are excellent ambassadors for the school and do a lot of work with local primary schools and younger students. Your behaviour and attendance are good. Examination results are improving and in 2006 they were good. The school has put in some key actions to make sure this continues and you all make good progress. You benefit from good teaching overall and satisfactory teaching in the sixth form, and have an extensive range of enrichment activities on offer which many of you take part in. Your parents are very supportive of the school.

To improve the school further, we have asked the headteacher and the senior managers to make sure you all know how to improve your work in all subjects. We have asked the school to improve the results and the progress you make in the sixth form. Senior managers closely monitor lessons. We have asked them to continue this important work but to focus more on how well the teaching helps you to learn in lessons.

The headteacher and senior managers make a good team. All staff at the school are highly committed to their work. We encourage you to continue to support the school and play your part in making it even better.

On behalf of the inspection team, may I wish you every success in the future.

Davinder Dosanjh Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools