

St Thomas a Becket Catholic College Specialist status in Humanities

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	108299
Local Authority	Wakefield
Inspection number	301673
Inspection dates	8–9 May 2007
Reporting inspector	Ross Parker

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	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	767
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Cllr Olivia Rowley
Headteacher	Mr B Donnellan
Date of previous school inspection	19 May 2003
School address	Barnsley Road Sandal Wakefield West Yorkshire WF2 6EQ
Telephone number	01924 303545
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Age group	11–16
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

This smaller than average voluntary aided Catholic comprehensive school serves a wide area, which includes areas of social disadvantage, on the southern fringe of Wakefield. The vast majority of students are of the Catholic faith, from local parishes as well as from Leeds and Barnsley. The proportion of students entitled to free school meals is below average. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below average, though an on-site unit for autistic students means that a higher than average proportion have statements of special educational need. Few pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds. The school gained Specialist status in Humanities in 2005.

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 a Becket Catholic College provides a good standard of education with several outstanding features. Honest and accurate self-evaluation provides a clear focus for continuous improvement and the college gives good value for money.

Standards are well above average and achievement is good. This is primarily because of students' consistently good approach to learning. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding throughout the college. Students have a very clear sense of right and wrong, with a strong sense of social justice, speaking up and acting in support of others, especially if they believe they are being bullied or are in need. Adults provide high levels of care and students show respect and concern for each other, so that they feel safe and well supported. Their response to efforts to promote healthy lifestyles is excellent. Their enjoyment shows in their above average attendance, the way they get on with each other and their participation in lessons. Daily life in the college is founded on everyone contributing to each individual's welfare and this is enhanced by extensive support for charities and the developing influence of the school council. Students make good progress in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) skills. Together with their good attitudes to work and well developed social skills, these contribute effectively to their future economic well-being.

Teaching is good and complements students' positive approach in class. Much of the teaching is outstanding, particularly when teachers use questioning skilfully to extend the challenge for students as well as to check their progress in lessons. However, this approach is not consistent across all subjects. The curriculum is good. A comprehensive programme of personal, social and health education contributes well to the students' personal development and is seen as helpful by the students. Strategies to enhance work-related learning are beginning to have an impact. The quality of personal care and support for vulnerable individuals is outstanding. Academic monitoring and guidance are rigorous and extensive.

Parents and students confirm the effectiveness of school leadership through their recognition of the school's high quality care. A notable strength of the headteacher's outstanding leadership is his unequivocal implementation of the values that underpin the school's religious character. His conviction that every child must have every chance to succeed is shared by all. Equality of opportunity is, therefore, a major strength. He has sustained a programme to develop the skills and effectiveness of managers at all levels. This has ensured good improvement since the previous inspection, including the achievement of specialist status in humanities. This in turn has helped to raise standards, improve links with primary schools and develop community learning. The college has good capacity for further improvement.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that, in all subjects, teachers follow best practice in using questioning skilfully to extend the challenge for pupils and to check their progress in lessons.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Students enter the school with slightly above average levels in national tests. They progress well overall to reach standards which are well above average. Achievement is good and in recent years there are examples where progress has been outstanding: Year 9 test results in 2006 were

particularly high, as were GCSE results in 2005. The school faced a decline in its GCSE results in 2006. This did not come as a surprise because a challenging cohort had not performed as well as expected throughout their time in school. After careful analysis of what caused the underperformance the school reorganised the support for students with more serious learning difficulties and restructured teaching groups to prevent a small number of less motivated students from influencing a wider group. Current data show that these modifications have re-established the trend towards the 2005 achievements. The high standards at Key Stage 3 have been maintained. Students in the current Year 11 are on course to reach the challenging targets set for them. Standards in English, a lead subject in the specialist status, have been consistently strong and this is reflected in the good level of literacy skills in all subjects.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Personal development and well-being are good. Students value highly the school's Catholic ethos and respond well to times for reflection about themselves, others and wider global issues. For example, students are insightful about what they have learned from the school council stating, 'We are less headstrong' or 'We listen better to others' views.' Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding overall. Students show a very good understanding of moral and social issues, for example in relation to cloning in biology. Relationships with adults and peers are underpinned by a willingness to listen to others. New students feel welcomed and are eager to learn from others from different cultural backgrounds, with a good understanding of and interest in different faiths. Students are cooperative and responsive in lessons and sometimes take the initiative in asking questions or pursuing their own ideas and interests. Students have an excellent understanding of how to lead healthy lives. The school council has enabled them to initiate and influence decisions about healthier school meals and the provision of drinking water. Many are highly aware of others' emotional well-being. They know the benefits of exercise and through science and personal, social, health and careers education lessons have a clear knowledge of the effects of drugs, alcohol and tobacco on health.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

The school judges the quality of teaching and learning to be good overall and the inspection confirms this. Much of the teaching is outstanding. Students learn consistently well because well established routines mean that behaviour is good. As a result students spend an unusually high proportion of each lesson on task and working hard. Teachers have high expectations and use tight timing to maintain a good pace of learning. Students collaborate well and switch between the varied activities with a minimal loss of time. Their high level of interest helps them to work well independently. This was demonstrated clearly when engineering students methodically ensured that their practical projects met all the criteria for the highest examination grade. There is good support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities so that they are able to engage in the lesson and make the same good rate of progress as other students. The outstanding teachers use questioning well to promote speculation, extended discussion and more analytical or evaluative thinking. They also find extensive opportunities to question and observe students at work so that they can build a clear picture of how much each individual is understanding and how they can help them to improve further. However, these approaches and techniques are not consistent across all subjects.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

A good range of curriculum activities effectively meets the needs, abilities and interests of the students. Consequently, all students achieve accredited qualifications. Most have above average skills in writing and speaking so find the courses and approaches to learning, encouraged by the school's specialist humanities status, very helpful in developing these skills further. The impact on students' research and study skills is notably strong. Students whose aptitudes suit vocational learning have their interests well met through off-site work-based courses. The school rightly continues to seek further appropriate provision for this significant minority of learners. There is good provision in all subjects for literacy, numeracy and ICT. The school has recognised that its provision for developing enterprise and for work-based learning is too limited. It has taken clear steps to deal with this but developments are at a too early stage to have had a significant impact. Students enjoy a good range of clubs and activities which support their academic and personal progress well.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

All aspects of care, guidance and support are impressive but the personal support for vulnerable students is outstanding. Similarly, the promotion of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is excellent. Arrangements for safeguarding children are secure. The strong Catholic ethos benefits from the work of the chaplaincy and a Catholic care counsellor. Days of reflection, retreats and family support contribute to the strong emphasis on spiritual well-being. Academic guidance for students who find it harder to cope in lessons is strong and a new withdrawal system has reduced exclusions. There is a robust system to track students' progress and identify any underachievement. Careers guidance, which had previously been identified as a weakness, has now been improved. Support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is effective, with good provision for autistic students who attend a special unit on the site. Vulnerable students are integrated well and there is an effective mentoring system to ease transition between primary and secondary school.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Leadership and management are good overall and the quality of senior leadership is excellent. The headteacher sets the tone with a clear commitment to the school reaching high standards in both the students' achievement and the care for them. His highly thoughtful and reflective style of leadership is extremely persuasive and is very effective in influencing staff to follow his lead. There are very good systems for middle leaders to evaluate how well subjects are doing and for bringing about improvement. Middle leaders have benefited from very effective training in the robust analysis of data to support improvements, although there is some inconsistency in the quality and use of this analysis. Senior managers challenge subject leaders well about the performance of their areas. There is some effective use of lesson observations at middle management level to support improved teaching and learning but an extensive, formalised programme is not sufficiently embedded. Financial management is secure and the school gears spending closely to supporting the students' progress and enriching their experiences. Specialist school funding has enhanced the use of ICT in learning and this has resulted in exciting new

facilities and learning opportunities such as the drama studio and new drama courses. The governing body has a good understanding of how well the school is doing. It fulfils its duties as a critical friend very well, frequently but constructively challenging the school's leadership in a way that results in well considered decisions.

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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
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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
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	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?	2
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	2
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
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	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
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
Does this school require special measures?	No
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

Inspection of St Thomas a Becket Catholic College Specialist status in Humanities, Wakefield, WF2 6EQ

Thank you for being so welcoming when we came to inspect your school earlier in the week. Thank you also for giving up your time to speak to us.

Your school provides a good standard of education, with several outstanding features.

Your test and examination results are well above average and you achieve well. Your ability to reflect on your own lives as well as on wider global issues is outstanding. So is your sense of right and wrong. Your response to guidance about healthy lifestyles is excellent.

Teaching is good. There are outstanding lessons where teachers use questioning really well to challenge you and to find out how well each one of you is coping with new ideas. We have asked the school to make this more consistent across all subjects. You can help by taking the initiative in lessons, asking more questions and introducing different points of view when they occur to you.

We agree with you that the quality of care and guidance is outstanding. That, along with your positive attitude to school, makes this such a good place to learn. All of this is well managed by the adults, led by a headteacher who is highly skilled in supporting experienced teachers to keep on striving for improvement.