

St Columba's Catholic Boys' School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	101477
Local Authority	Bexley
Inspection number	307703
Inspection dates	12–13 September 2007
Reporting inspector	Brian Evans

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	11–16
Gender of pupils	Boys
Number on roll	
School	860
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs E Creed
Headteacher	Mr B Cannon
Date of previous school inspection	13 October 2003
School address	Halcot Avenue Bexleyheath DA6 7QB
Telephone number	01322 553236
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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

St Columba's Catholic Boys' School has been reorganised since the last inspection in 2003. Since September 2005 it no longer has a sixth form and is now an 11–16 school. The headteacher was appointed three years ago. It receives boys from a wide geographical area and a large number of primary schools. An above average proportion of students come from minority ethnic groups. Few students are at an early stage of learning English. There is a below average proportion of students eligible for free school meals. The number of students with statements of special educational need is above average. The attainment of students on entry to the school is broadly average. This is in the context of a local authority that is selective. The school was designated as a specialist visual and performing arts college in September 2006.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The school is emerging from a turbulent transitional period following its reorganisation into 11–16 school. This had an adverse impact on overall standards and achievement. However, strong leadership and management from the headteacher over the past three years, supported well by his senior staff, have now reversed this decline. The 2007 examination and test results show significant improvements over previous years. A boy commented appreciatively on the school's 'vast improvement' over the last two years. Standards are now broadly average and most students make the progress expected of them given their attainment on entry. A boy's parents stated, 'We were delighted with our son's Year 9 national test results – he is thrilled and is now keen to achieve good results in his GCSEs.' Notably, the proportion of students achieving a GCSE Grade C or better in both English and mathematics in 2007 was an impressive 12-percentage points improvement over 2006. This confirms good progress in these subjects for students in Years 10 and 11. The school's designation as a visual and performing arts college is having a good impact on achievement as more students take up opportunities for extending their cross-curricular learning both in lessons and in after-school clubs. Thanks to the modifications made to the curriculum, within the resources available, teachers are able respond to the vocational interests of students well. The curriculum provided increasingly meets the needs of all groups of students including ethnic minorities and the needs of students with learning difficulties. Overall, teaching and learning is broadly satisfactory because there is unevenness in quality between different teachers and between subjects. The good or better teaching observed was in lessons characterised by students learning enthusiastically and, therefore, making very good progress. Teachers' assessment of learning needs do not consistently lead to appropriate levels of challenge for individuals or for groups of students. On occasions, students comment that they do not actively participate in their learning. Attitudes to learning and behaviour are good generally but a few occasionally disrupt the learning of others. Students' basic skills in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) develop well.

The tracking and assessment systems to monitor each student's progress are at an early stage of development. Teachers do not yet use the system effectively to ensure that students know what they have to do to improve. The school's commitment to involve all students in the life of the school and the promotion of equality and concern for the individual are real strengths. This, and the recent significant improvement in achievement, provides solid evidence that the school has a good capacity to improve. The leadership team and middle managers identify clear targets and priorities for school improvement and standards are improving. The whole person, including spiritual, moral, social and cultural aspects, is developed well within a framework of an active Christian and local community. Care, guidance and support are good as is the attention to healthy lifestyles and well-being.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve teaching and learning so that a greater proportion of lessons are good or better.
- Use the new assessment database more effectively to enable students to know more precisely how to improve and thereby make better progress.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next Section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

By the end of Year 11, achievement is satisfactory and standards are average. Boys make satisfactory progress as they move through Key Stage 3. In Year 9 national tests, students of all ethnic groups and social backgrounds make the progress expected of them. In 2006 and in 2007 Black African students achieved better than expected results in tests and examinations. Students with learning difficulties make good progress because teachers meet their specific needs well. In Years 10 and 11, students make good progress in their basic skills but their performance varies between subjects. The school made successful arrangements to support many borderline students in English and mathematics so that they achieved higher than expected targets. Students generally achieve well in geography, history, physical education and art but standards in design and technology and French are too low. When students with General National Vocational Qualification ICT and GCSE entries for 2007 are analysed the proportion of students who gained at least 5 grades A*-C or better was well above average. However, the proportion of GCSE A* and A grades obtained were much lower than the national averages for 2006 and the proportion of unclassified grades were above average compared with the same year. Overall, the school met its challenging targets in 2007.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Most students enjoy school. They are keen to talk about their work and to support each other both in their learning and around the school. Students believe that their School Council has made a difference because the school asks their views and responds to them. A student commented, 'the way the school listens to us has improved, for instance, we still get chips but only on Fridays!' A healthy lifestyle features strongly in the school through physical activity and in healthy eating. Attendance is good. Behaviour in lessons and around the school is generally good. Students are critical of the few who occasionally stop them learning in lessons. High levels of exclusion prevalent during the reorganisation have recently dropped significantly. This is because the school is more effectively meeting the needs of disaffected students through well-organised internal units and a range of rewards and sanctions.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

The good teaching and learning seen in the school is not shared widely enough and so the quality is inconsistent both between teachers and between subjects. Teachers have good subject knowledge and most plan their lessons well with appropriate and varied activities. They use resources, including interactive whiteboards, well to stimulate students' interest and to support their learning. There are good relationships between the students and the teachers, but too much of the learning is passive. One student rightly said, 'lessons would be better if we were more actively involved'. Teaching assistants work well with students who have learning difficulties and disabilities to help them to understand the work. However, work is not always well matched to the needs of all the students, with some of them finding the work too difficult and some of them finding it too easy. Teachers usually explain to the students what they should be achieving by end of the lesson. However, sometimes students have difficulty in understanding exactly

what it is they should be able to do. In some lessons, the students do not participate enough, nor do the teachers check their progress individually. In contrast, an outstanding lesson in French was an example to be followed by other teachers. In this lesson, students thoroughly enjoyed being actively involved in their own learning throughout. They assessed their own work and that of their peers, and they had a clear idea of what they needed to do to achieve the next steps in their learning.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum is good and builds on the aims and Christian ethos of the school and on the needs of individual students. The good ICT facilities support students' work very well across the curriculum. For example, in science it helps students to understand difficult concepts such as genetic engineering and in French to link the language to visual images. Aspects of literacy and numeracy are addressed well across the curriculum. For example, stressing key words in topics is having a positive impact on progress in literacy in many lessons. Particular strengths of the curriculum are the vocational pathways and links with neighbouring colleges. These have a positive impact on both the students' achievement and on their personal development. It prepares them well for their future. There is a wide range of enrichment activities on offer after school, including sports, arts and chess clubs. Many students participate in these and benefit greatly from them. The school's specialism in the visual and performing arts is having a positive impact many areas of the curriculum and has a high profile in the school environment. There are good aspects, such as the six enrichment days, in the way that activities are planned to cover aspects of national guidance on Education for Sustainable Development.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Students are confident about approaching teachers about problems they have. The community police officer is very much part of school life, and described by staff as a 'great asset'. Risk assessments and arrangements for safeguarding students are clear, up to date and understood. There is also good support for those with emotional and behavioural needs through the skilful individual help they experience in the school's internal unit - the Columba Centre. Vulnerable students and those at risk are well cared for through speedy liaison with several specialist agencies. Issues such as anti-bullying and drugs awareness are high profile in the school. Healthy lifestyles are encouraged well in lessons about personal well being, through healthy eating and increased time for physical education. Parents confirm that the school is now much more settled and supportive of their sons.

Students appreciate how good marking by some teachers helps them understand how well they are performing. Most are aware of their levels and subject targets but they do not always know how to reach them in a particular lesson or piece of work.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The leadership and the management of the school are good and provide a strong basis for raising achievement following a difficult reorganisation process. The head teacher has a clear vision for the future development of the school. His clear and committed leadership has guided

the school through many initiatives successfully, managing some difficult issues with tact and sensitivity. The two deputies and the senior leadership team share and support the headteacher's vision well.

The input from the London Challenge initiative and the targeting of specific students has contributed to the recent improvement in standards. The focus on improving and raising standards is evident in most subject areas. However, the monitoring of teaching and learning by some middle managers tends to be on an informal basis and lacks consistency and, on occasions, rigour.

The school self-evaluation accurately highlights strengths and weaknesses and clearly identifies priorities and action plans for development. The school's physical environment has changed significantly in recent years and the effective management of these changes has resulted in students and teachers having pride in their new accommodation. Effective use is made of the very considerable investment in ICT. The governing body provides satisfactory support and meets its legal requirements but does not focus enough on standards. Partly as a legacy of the reorganisation process and subsequent changes in admission numbers, the school currently has a deficit budget. The staff and governors have agreed a strategy with the local authority and the Diocese to restore a balanced budget over the next three years. The school provides satisfactory value for money.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	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?	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	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?	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2
How well learners enjoy their education	2
The attendance of learners	2
The behaviour of learners	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	2

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3
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?	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
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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	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	3
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3
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**

25 September 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of St Columba's Catholic Boys' School, Bexleyheath, DA6 7QB

Thank you for the help you gave us with the recent inspection of your school and for the friendly way you received us. Our overall finding is that your school provides a satisfactory standard of education.

We agree with the great majority of you that the school has made significant improvement in the last few years. Most of you told us that you enjoy coming to school and feel safe. The new buildings and classroom facilities, especially now that St Columba's is a specialist school in the performing and visual arts subjects, are contributing to a good learning environment. We were impressed by the strong partnerships the school have with local schools and colleges and with the wider community.

Things we also like about your school are:

- the care and support you are given to help you succeed in school and in later life
- the mature way in which the school council discusses a wide range of school issues as, for example, in its discussions on healthy eating and lifestyles.

We have asked your school, with your help, to make improvements and these are for

- senior and middle leaders to ensure that the best teaching methods are shared more widely across the school
- teachers to use their information on student assessment and marking to let each of you know what you have to do to improve your work.

We feel the staff and governors have the skills to make your school even better in the future and we hope you will play your part in this. Thank you again for all your help in the inspection and we wish you every success for the future.

Brian Evans

Lead inspector