

The Sacred Heart Language College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	102243
Local Authority	Harrow
Inspection number	307946
Inspection dates	4–5 June 2008
Reporting inspector	Nigel Fletcher 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	11–16
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number on roll	
School	735
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr James Coyle
Headteacher	Miss Geraldine Higgins
Date of previous school inspection	28 February 2005
School address	High Street Wealdstone Harrow HA3 7AY
Telephone number	020 8863 9922
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Age group	11-16
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

The Sacred Heart Language College is a Catholic comprehensive school for girls aged 11 to 16. It is situated in the London borough of Harrow and accepts pupils from a wide geographical area. Consequently, it is socially very mixed. The proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is higher than in most schools, and is spread across a number of ethnic groups. However, the percentage who have English as an additional language is lower than average. The number of students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below average, although the number with statements of special educational needs is about average. The school is very popular and is heavily over-subscribed. It has had specialist status for languages since 2003 and plans to open a sixth form in September 2009. The head teacher has been in post since September 2007.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

The Sacred Heart Language College is an outstanding school, in which, according to a parent, 'children are encouraged to make full use of their natural talents'. It not only achieves high academic standards, but also places equal focus on the learners' personal development. 'The school really does help the girls to become confident young women who achieve their potential,' said another parent. The pupils enjoy school, attend well, and treat adults and each other with mutual respect. As they move through the school they grow in confidence and are a genuine pleasure to talk to.

Girls enter the school with higher levels of attainment than average. They continue to make excellent progress at each key stage and achieve particularly high standards in their national tests and examinations. These standards are achieved through outstanding teaching and learning where teachers go out of their way to ensure that lessons are lively, contain a variety of activities, and cater for the girls' individual needs. The school's system for monitoring learners' progress against their academic targets is used well to identify those in need of extra help. Exemplary additional support helps pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities to progress as well as their peers. Effective intervention programmes, including Saturday classes, help pupils who are not progressing to expectations to get back on target. This academic support is complemented by excellent care and guidance from the staff to ensure that the girls also mature in their personal development. The school encourages them to think for themselves, take initiative and to act as leaders. Many charity events are arranged by the girls themselves and their levels of fund-raising are impressive.

Outstanding leadership and management throughout the school are the reason for the school's success. The new headteacher sets a clear direction, supported by a dedicated staff. Determined and never complacent, she leads a highly competent senior team equally committed to improvement. Despite year on year improvement in academic standards to a high level, the school is not resting on its laurels. The headteacher and senior leadership team know very well the school's strengths and areas for further development and ensures that all the middle leaders are accountable for improving standards within their own subject areas. The school accepts that although the quality of teaching and learning is outstanding overall, there are a few areas where improvements can still be made. For example, where the modern foreign languages have been underperforming compared with other subjects, appropriate actions have been instigated and clear improvement can now be seen.

The academic curriculum meets the needs of pupils well, although the school is aware of the need to improve vocational opportunities. It provides an extensive range of additional sporting, academic, cultural and personal enrichment activities in which there is high participation. The language specialism pervades the school and has had a positive impact on the overall ethos of the school. One teacher suggested that the influence of the specialism is that 'language is a uniting factor in the school, not a dividing one'.

Equality of opportunity is at the heart of its work, and the school is very inclusive. As one parent observed, 'There is a great respect for all children, irrespective of race, colour, religion or disability.'

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise the proportion of outstanding teaching throughout the school.

- Ensure that all students have sufficient curriculum opportunities to meet their needs.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

The overall levels of attainment and the progress made by the pupils are outstanding. They enter with standards that are above average, and continue to make excellent progress throughout the school. Results in the national tests for 14 year olds have improved year on year and are now exceptionally high, particularly in English and mathematics. Achievement at the end of Year 11 also continues to improve and learners make excellent progress. Attainment at GCSE is significantly higher than is found nationally, with the proportion of pupils gaining five A*-C grades at GCSE having risen to 88% in 2007, and 78% when including English and mathematics. All learners gain at least five passes at grades A* to G.

Despite these high standards, the school is constantly striving to drive them higher. It has targeted the highest A to A* grades as an area for improvement in a small number of subjects, as it believes that the proportion of students who gain those grades is not yet as high as it could be. It has recognised that achievement in modern foreign languages is not as high as in other subjects and has initiated appropriate actions that are already leading to improvements.

The school analyses the performance of specific groups of learners and takes action to address any differences. For instance, students with special educational needs such as dyslexia make excellent progress because of well-targeted support. As a result, there is little significant difference between the achievements of different groups, including minority ethnic groups, although those from Irish heritage achieve particularly well.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Learners' personal development and well-being are outstanding. The Catholic ethos underpinning school life contributes to the girls' excellent spiritual development, but does not prevent their understanding and appreciation of the beliefs of other faiths. Their cultural development is exemplary, due partly to the racial harmony which the school fosters, but also, for example, through the international aspects that are enhanced by the language specialism. Pupils have developed a strong moral code. As one parent recognised, 'they have respect for themselves, their teachers and fellow pupils'. They contribute widely to the community both in and outside school. For example, girls speak enthusiastically about the local charities they support, the support they give at local primary schools, and particularly about the 'Heart to Heart' peer counselling scheme in the school in which the older girls help and support the younger ones.

The pupils enjoy being at school. Their enthusiasm to participate in the activities that the school offers, and their appreciation of what teachers do to support them, are reflected in their exemplary behaviour and attendance. They feel safe and have a strong awareness of the need for healthy lifestyles. Most pupils are unaware of any bullying taking place, but say they know what to do if it does and are confident that it would be dealt with quickly and effectively. Although the school recognises that the development of work related skills is not as broad as it could be, the high standards in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) prepare learners well for the workplace.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

The quality of teaching and learning is outstanding. Excellent relationships and mutual respect result in learners' mature behaviour in lessons, their ability to discuss ideas and think critically, and their eagerness to achieve success. Such qualities lead to outstanding achievement. Parents report on how well 'the teachers know the children, and their individual needs, and how much they encourage them to work hard and achieve well'. The teachers' very good knowledge and enthusiasm for their subjects is evident through well-planned lessons with challenging and enjoyable activities suited to the individual needs of learners. ICT is used well to enhance learning, particularly in modern foreign languages.

Learners make particularly rapid progress in lessons which maintain a brisk pace, encourage one-to-one and group work, and make students think deeply through probing questions, as was observed in a thought-provoking Year 9 history lesson. However, in a small minority of lessons, teaching lacks the stimulation, excitement and opportunities for independent learning found elsewhere, resulting in a corresponding lower level of engagement of learners. There are clear, comprehensive systems for assessing and recording students' progress and this information is used well to keep students, and their parents, informed about their progress, and what they need to do to improve.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum is good. It is well planned and effectively meets the needs and expectations of most of the learners. However, although the majority of girls progress onto GCE courses in further education, the school recognises that there are few opportunities to study vocational courses in Years 10 and 11 apart from courses in travel and tourism, and dance. Provision for more-able learners is very good and includes accelerated courses and the ability to study further languages at GCSE.

There is a wide range of extra-curricula activities which are well supported by the pupils. These contribute well to their overall enjoyment and personal development. They increase the girls' life experiences, confidence, and social skills, and include the Duke of Edinburgh Award, sporting and other outdoor activities, as well as the opportunity to study other languages after school. Pupils are particularly proud of the STEM club which is currently building a 'green' car.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Care, guidance and support are outstanding and pupils thrive in this environment. Staff at all levels show a high level of commitment to ensuring pupils' well being, helping them to maximise their achievement, and to overcome any barriers they may face. As one Year 9 pupil said, 'I like being in this school because of all the support I am given by my teachers. They are always pushing us to do our best.' The calm, orderly and purposeful atmosphere around the school is a testament to the pupils' response to the high expectations which staff have of them.

Parents comment favourably on how their children are helped to settle into the school quickly through the strong links which the school has with local primary schools. Throughout their life

at school pupils receive clear guidance of their choices at the various transition points, including the options available locally for further education or employment. Safeguarding arrangements meet national requirements, and risk assessments are rigorous and regularly reviewed. The use of pupil tracking data is used effectively by all staff to ensure that learners have the best support to achieve their targets. Provision for potentially vulnerable pupils, such as those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, is outstanding. Staff work well together to ensure that pupils' individual needs are identified and met, for example by modifying the curriculum for individuals when appropriate. Effective relationships with outside agencies ensure excellent support for pupils with, for example, hearing and/or visual impairment. As a result, these girls achieve at least as well as their peers, and many gain considerably in self-confidence and personal skills which stand them in good stead in later life.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Leadership and management are outstanding. Through exemplary leadership, and well supported by her senior team, the new headteacher is sustaining the school's drive to continue to improve. Committed middle leaders and other staff share the clear vision for school improvement, the impact of which is evident in the continuing upward trend in students' progress, and in the caring ethos for both staff and students.

Robust quality assurance and critical self-evaluation are key to the school's continued improvement. School leaders are not complacent about the schools' developments and set challenging targets which are regularly reviewed and evaluated. They have an accurate knowledge of the school's strengths, and particularly what needs to be done to improve further. For example, the rigorous monitoring of the quality of lessons results in an accurate understanding of the strengths, and areas for development, of all teachers. Professional development activities are increasingly effective in developing the capacity of all staff, and individual skills and abilities are exploited for the benefit of others.

The specialist status of the school has been led well. It has brought a vibrant ethos to the school, and the richness and diversity of languages play a key part in the girls' academic and personal development. It has enabled improved links with local primary schools, and with parents, through the provision of language classes. Governors understand their role well and have an excellent knowledge of the school. They provide appropriate challenge and support to school leaders. The school manages its budget well and provides excellent value for money. It has an excellent capacity to continue to improve.

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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?	1
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?	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	1

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1
How well learners enjoy their education	1
The attendance of learners	1
The behaviour of learners	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?	1
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?	1
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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1
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	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1
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

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

18 June 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of The Sacred Heart Language College, Harrow, HA3 7AY

Thank you for the warm welcome you gave us when we visited your school. We enjoyed meeting you, talking to your teachers and other staff, and visiting lessons. Many of you and your parents told us how the caring and supportive environment, and your good relationships with teachers, meant that you enjoy school and feel safe there. We judged your school to be an extremely caring school that is providing you with an outstanding education. We were particularly impressed by:

- the progress you make whilst at school, and the results you achieve in public tests and examinations, through the high quality of many of your lessons
- your attitudes to learning and each other, and the way in which your confidence and self-esteem develops as you move through the school
- the way the staff care for you, and support you in your learning, and when you have any other problems or concerns
- the way the school is led, and the commitment of its staff to your well-being
- the enrichment activities that the school provides to help you enjoy school and make good progress in your academic and personal development.

To make your school even better we have recommended that it:

- continues to work with the teachers to make sure that there are more outstanding lessons
- ensures that the curriculum fully meets the needs and aspirations of all students, by providing more opportunities for vocational studies.

The headteacher, senior staff and governors know what needs to be done to improve the school and have plans to do it. We believe that if you behave well and work hard in lessons, and help the school put these plans in place, then standards will rise even further. On behalf of the inspection team, thank you for making our visit so enjoyable and we wish you every success for the future.

Yours sincerely

Nigel Fletcher

Her Majesty's Inspector