

St Thomas More Catholic School, Willenhall

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	104259
Local Authority	Walsall
Inspection number	308554
Inspection dates	10–11 October 2007
Reporting inspector	Philippa Francis 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	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1185
6th form	263
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Richard Dalton
Headteacher	Sean Flynn
Date of previous school inspection	18 October 2004
School address	Darlaston Lane Bilston WV14 7BL
Telephone number	01902 368798
Fax number	01902 365397

Age group	11-19
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four Additional Inspectors. A section 48 inspection took place at the same time as the section 5 inspection.

Description of the school

St Thomas More is a large comprehensive school with a sixth form. It has held specialist status in business and enterprise since 2003. It serves an area of high social and economic disadvantage and a greater proportion of students than average is eligible for free school meals. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is lower than average, but increasing. A slightly higher than average proportion of students comes from minority ethnic groups.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

St Thomas More is an inclusive, popular school with a growing sixth form, which is well supported by parents and the local community. Its overall effectiveness is satisfactory, a judgement that matches the school's own view of itself. Achievement is satisfactory and standards are average across the school. Students make good gains in their personal and social development. The school consistently delivers a high level of care and support for its students. The curriculum is developing well, and is good. Specialist status is managed well and has had a positive impact on much of the school's work. Leadership and management are satisfactory. Managers work well with a full range of partners, in particular the 15 primary schools linked through specialist status. The school's record of improvement was strong up until 2006, with its results improving at a better rate than was found nationally. However, the results dipped in 2007, with underachievement in mathematics and science. In part, this was due to difficulties in recruiting teachers in key subject areas but also because of insufficient monitoring of students' progress. Since that point, the school has taken prompt action to tackle this underachievement, with clear signs of improvement. It has satisfactory capacity to improve further.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory, with good features. Lessons are enjoyable and disruptive behaviour is much less common than in recent years. Teachers plan carefully, but often over-direct lessons, missing opportunities to provide extra challenge to stretch students. Assessment works well to support learning, with a greater emphasis in the current year on the effective use of homework. Good provision for social, moral, spiritual and cultural education, along with many initiatives to promote enterprise skills, helps students to develop well and prepares them effectively for their future lives. The school has been successful in improving attendance and behaviour, which are now good. It has maintained a high level of care, guidance and support, although the link between pastoral and academic managers is still not strong enough.

Self-evaluation is comprehensive and evaluative, with well-focused priorities for improvement identified. However, the actions identified for improvement in teaching and learning are taking time to come to fruition. Improvements to a number of management functions have taken place, including putting in place a better system for tracking students' attendance, behaviour and progress, now being used to good effect. The process of setting targets is inadequate and undergoing a much-needed review to ensure the provision of subject-based, challenging targets that promote improvement. Resources are used effectively as a result of tight financial management, and the school provides satisfactory value for money. Governance is good, providing detailed scrutiny of the school's work and in rigorously holding the school to account for the performance of students.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

An increasing number of students stay on into the sixth form. Their results are generally improving, and they make satisfactory progress. In 2007, the overall pass rate at A level was broadly average, and above average in business studies, sociology and information and communication technology (ICT). Retention rates are satisfactory and progression to higher education is good, especially as many students come from backgrounds of limited experience of this level of study. Students develop confidence and learn useful study skills, although their ability to work independently is underdeveloped. Teaching is satisfactory with good features.

The academic curriculum is broad at A level, and includes a limited number of vocational options. Personal support for students is comprehensive and improved tutorial arrangements, including more effective target setting, are having a beneficial impact on achievement in the current academic year. Students make good progress in their personal development and play an important part in contributing to life in the whole school.

What the school should do to improve further

- Monitor progress more effectively in mathematics and science and intervene promptly when students are at risk of underachieving
- Improve the quality of learning by implementing rigorously the specific actions for improvement identified through lesson observations
- Clarify the systems for setting targets and set students targets that are more challenging in subjects.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Students' prior attainment varies from broadly average to slightly below average, especially in literacy and numeracy skills. The level of achievement made by all groups of students is satisfactory. Achievement in two of the school's specialist subjects - business studies and ICT - is good. The development of enterprise skills across the school is a particular strength. Students make better progress between Key Stage 3 and 4, compensating for their slower progress in the earlier key stage. Progress in English, mathematics and science varies. Students make satisfactory progress in English and science, where there has been improvement. However, in mathematics in 2007, there was significant underachievement at Key Stage 4. Inspection evidence shows that students are now making satisfactory progress in mathematics. In 2007, the school came close to or met its statutory targets at Key Stage 4, but undershot its targets in the core subjects at Key Stage 3, except in ICT.

Standards at Key Stage 3 have been rising steadily in recent years, at a better rate than nationally. Overall, in 2006, standards at Key Stage 3 were close to average and above average in English. However, standards dipped in 2007 to below average, reflecting this cohort's lower starting point. Standards at Key Stage 4 had also been rising up to 2006, narrowing the gap between the school's results and the national average. However, in 2007, albeit for a slightly lower ability cohort, results dipped, and attainment in mathematics and science was well below average. Almost all students achieved at least one pass at GCSE and the percentage gaining five or more A* to G grades was slightly higher than the national figure.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students really enjoy school and the majority want to learn. Many participate enthusiastically in a wide range of extra-curricular activities. Students are generally considerate in their behaviour towards each other, with little bullying reported. Disruptive behaviour is being addressed more effectively with the support of the recently set up inclusion unit. Attendance is good and punctuality is improving. Students have an informed awareness of developing healthier lifestyles through participation in sport, gaining a better understanding of issues such as the dangers of

substance abuse and through seeking healthier food options. They are well prepared for the world of work through work-related learning opportunities across the curriculum, and projects such as establishing a 'Young Chamber', where they develop confidence, organisational skills and financial expertise.

Assemblies, the curriculum and positive role modelling by staff promote students' social and moral development well. Their spiritual development needs are met well through a rich prayer life and opportunities for quiet reflection in the school chapel. Multicultural aspects of today's society are explored in dance and art, as well as discussion in lessons about other faiths and cultures. The school council makes a valuable contribution to school life, and is integral to the decision-making process. Students run a wide variety of successful fundraising events for charity.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Typically, lessons are structured well, build on previous learning, and involve good relationships between students and teachers. Teachers are well prepared and have a good command of their subject. They regularly set appropriate homework which reinforces and extends learning, and mark students' work in a way that helps them to improve. A significant amount of teaching is better and, at its best, enables students to make good progress. However, good teaching is not seen consistently enough. Teaching is sometimes over-directed and prevents greater involvement of students, including in the assessment of their own work or that of others. Work is not always well matched to the needs and abilities of all the students. In a few lessons, learning objectives are unspecific with insufficient checks that learning has taken place. The school's monitoring of teaching is systematic and accurate, and it has a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in teaching. However, it does not always provide effective action to bring about more widespread high quality teaching.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum, enriched through the business and enterprise specialism and by a strong extra-curricular programme, is good. The timetabled curriculum is satisfactory overall, matching the needs of most of students, including those with learning difficulties. The provision for ICT across the curriculum is good; however, provision for skills in literacy and numeracy is not yet well established. At Key Stage 4, students are given the opportunity to study an appropriate range of optional subjects which include mainly GCSE courses and a few vocational and learning support options which also support learning in the core subjects. Students have been influential in the introduction of media studies, performing arts and sociology and value their involvement in this respect. The introduction of the young apprenticeship course in 2005 for a small cohort of students has been highly successful and provides a clear direction for further development of the vocational strand of the curriculum. The distinctive set of learning support options is valued by students and parents. However, the potential that these coordinated courses provide for offering further and higher qualifications to students is not fully realised.

Enrichment is a significant strength and includes a strong element of work-related learning, a programme of business and enterprise activities that provides a good preparation for economic well-being and a broad range of extra-curricular activities. This also encourages some outstanding individual student initiative and enterprise. Curricular innovation provides good opportunities for early entry for a short course in GCSE religious education in Year 9 and GCSE mathematics in Year 10, followed by a module of AS mathematics in Year 11.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Well-established systems and routines that ensure good care and support mean that students settle into school life quickly, especially in Year 7. Year 10 students, trained as peer mentors, further support their well-being. Child protection arrangements are secure, and sound procedures are in place to ensure the safety and well-being of students on visits out of school. Students and parents praise staff for their approachability and willingness to give help and advice with academic and personal needs. However, academic monitoring and support is not as developed as the strong pastoral care, because they are only now closely linked. The newly-developed system for tracking progress and setting individual targets in all subjects is at an early stage of implementation across the school. Support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is satisfactory, with a greater focus on literacy rather than the full range of all other subjects. Careers guidance is satisfactory, with good quality resources, including ICT software packages, but limited curriculum time.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Leadership has a realistic view of the school and a clear vision for improvement. Managers ensure the provision of a safe, well-resourced and productive learning environment. The impressive school building functions well and pastoral management is strong. The impact of managers on raising achievement has been strong up to 2006; however, in 2007, a general downturn in results occurred. Difficulties in recruiting key staff and in providing satisfactory cover for absent staff, along with shortcomings in monitoring progress, especially during the revision period before the final examinations in mathematics, contributed to this downturn. However, rigorous evaluation of shortcomings and subsequent prompt action have resolved many of these concerns. The school is now fully staffed and current students are making satisfactory progress.

The present system for setting targets for students' performance is inadequate in promoting achievement. Managers are implementing a revised approach that focuses effectively on individual students' performance in particular subject areas. The system for monitoring classroom performance is strong. Managers at all levels have clear responsibilities and meet regularly with members of the senior leadership team. They feel well supported and well resourced to lead their particular areas. Managers have focused resources to improve the quality of teaching but these initiatives have had limited impact. The recruitment of specialist staff, sharing good practice, developing teaching skills and an atmosphere of professional dialogue are positive and effective starts to this improvement. A whole-curriculum review is timely and is based

around ensuring a close match between the courses offered and meeting the needs and aspirations of all students by increasing the vocational options still further. The school's specialism is managed well, has a positive impact across the school and provides some of the best results.

Self-evaluation is realistic and thorough. Governance is good. Governors provide challenge to school leaders and are 'critical friends'. They are active in the life of the school and many have close links with particular areas. Financial control is sound, with the resources used well to enhance the quality of education. Value for money is satisfactory.

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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	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?	3	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	3	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	2
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	2
How well learners enjoy their education	2	2
The attendance of learners	2	2
The behaviour of learners	2	2
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	2
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2	2

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3	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?	3	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	4	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	3	
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	2	
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

15 October 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of St Thomas More Catholic School, Willenhall, WV14 7BL

Thank you for contributing to the recent inspection of your school. We enjoyed meeting many of you and valued your comments about school life.

We judge your school to be satisfactory overall. The progress you make in school and the results you gain in external tests are satisfactory, although the results in GCSE mathematics and science were well below average in 2007. We have asked your teachers to focus on these important subjects and to monitor your progress carefully to help raise standards. You gain good results in business studies and ICT, and the enterprise skills you develop prepare you well for the future. Your personal development is good and teachers provide a high level of care, support and guidance for you. The majority of lessons you receive are satisfactory, enjoyable, well planned and help you to learn. In a few lessons, your teachers do not encourage you to think for yourselves enough, or give you sufficient challenge to stretch your capabilities. We have asked that your teachers place more emphasis on these aspects of lessons. The curriculum is good, and new courses such as the 'Young Apprenticeship' scheme and in performing arts are positive additions.

The headteacher and his team have sound plans for the future and know well the strengths and areas for improvement in your school. We have asked them to review the process of setting targets in individual subjects to make sure that you are all motivated to improve and to monitor your progress in mathematics and science closely, especially close to final exam time.

Congratulations on the successful fundraising that you undertake and on your contribution to school life, especially in support of younger students. In particular, we noted the enthusiasm in your contributions to the 'Young Chamber' initiative and wish you success with this valuable piece of work.

Yours sincerely

Philippa Francis Her Majesty's Inspector



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