

St John Plessington Catholic College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	105109
Local Authority	Wirral
Inspection number	308770
Inspection dates	12–13 November 2007
Reporting inspector	Ian Thompson

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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1299
6th form	222
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Bert Suffield
Headteacher	Mr Thomas Quinn
Date of previous school inspection	2 February 2004
School address	Old Chester Road Bebington Wirral Merseyside CH63 7LF
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by five Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

This larger than average school is a specialist college for humanities and technology serving a wide catchment area. Almost two thirds of the students come from areas of considerable social and economic disadvantage. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals in both the main college and the sixth form is well above the national average. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is close to average, but the proportion with a statement of special educational need is above average. There proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is much smaller than usual, with no groups of significant size. Only a few students are at an early stage of learning English.

Since the last inspection the college has gone through a period of disruption caused by rebuilding work. Some 25% of the staff are new to the college in the last three years, including the headteacher and five members of the senior management team.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

This is an outstanding school in which exceptional things happen. The atmosphere of calm confidence and excellent relationships in the college is second to none. Students get on very well with each other and with staff. A typical comment is, 'The best thing about this school is that everyone will help you.' Behaviour is exemplary. Above all in this college it is both acceptable and expected to do your best. Consequently, students' personal development and achievement are outstanding. Students' standards on entry to the college are below average; for a substantial proportion they are well below and the proportion of students who are more able is much smaller than usual. By the end of Year 11 standards are broadly average and have shown considerable improvement over recent years. The college has gained the support of the great majority of parents, who recognise the progress that the college has made, writing comments such as, 'I am happy in the knowledge that my son's education is in the best possible hands.'

A number of factors combine to underpin the college's rapid improvement. Foremost among these is the high standard of leadership and management. The headteacher's vision and drive are unequivocal in setting high standards for all in the college. Expectations and accountability are clear. All aspects of the college's work are continually checked through a well designed system of rigorous monitoring of performance by a very capable team of senior and middle managers. Innovations are evaluated carefully and modified where necessary. As a result, students benefit from good teaching of an excellent curriculum that meets their needs and aspirations.

The college provides an outstanding level of pastoral care so that students feel safe and supported. Students speak highly of the opportunity to influence college development through the college council. Much is done to raise students' expectations of themselves when they join the college. They are given the confidence and motivation to succeed so that they enjoy their education. Students believe the college is, in their words, 'a big family where everyone is the same' and 'the college makes you feel confident you can achieve'. The key element in the college's promotion of high levels of achievement is the way that exemplary, rigorous and regular assessment ensures that all students know how well they are doing, how well they should be doing and what they need to do to improve. A wealth of data enables all staff to identify any difficulties at an early stage and to take prompt action to secure improvement.

The college meets its targets as a specialist college well, having been successfully reassessed and awarded an additional specialism. The positive impact of specialist status is to be seen in rising standards and achievement, particularly in the specialist subjects. The college's specialist status has also been used very well to bring about improvements in the curriculum, premises and resources. Excellent use is made of partnerships in the wider community to broaden students' experience and to enhance their personal development.

As a result of the exceptional systems for checking its work, the college's self-evaluation of its performance is accurate and matches inspection findings. The senior management team is well aware of areas where improvement can be made and have clear plans to deal with them. Excellent progress has been made since the last inspection. Issues for improvement have been tackled very well; for example, provision for music has been transformed. In view of the improvement already managed the college has created a very strong platform on which to improve further.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Students make good progress in the sixth form and their achievement is good. The vast majority complete their courses successfully. Their personal development is outstanding. They eagerly take part in community service both in the college and the wider community. Lessons are good, with students benefiting from their teachers' very secure understanding of their subjects' assessment requirements. Although the curriculum is good, the college acknowledges the need to increase its range of vocational courses. Personal, social and health education, as well as enrichment activities, is excellent. Guidance is outstanding, enabling students to move on successfully to their first choice higher education establishments or enter employment or training. The tracking of students' academic progress is exemplary. Excellent, analytical leadership keeps the quality of provision constantly under review and identifies suitable priorities for improvement.

What the school should do to improve further

- The college's leadership has an exceptionally clear view of its performance. Priorities for further improvement have been identified and plans are already in place.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students of all levels of capability make good progress through Years 7 to 9. In national tests at the end of Year 9 in 2007, results at the expected Level 5 in English were above average and close to average in mathematics and science. Results at the higher Level 6 in English and mathematics were close to average. These results continue the rising trend of recent years. Progress accelerates in Years 10 and 11 so that overall achievement is outstanding. The sharply upward trend of GCSE results was maintained in 2007. The great majority of students reached their very challenging targets. Overall results were close to average and well above what might have been expected in relation to students' starting points. Work seen during the inspection shows that standards continue to rise. Improvements in mathematics results at both key stages particularly demonstrate the college's ability to raise standards through better teaching and the very effective use of targets and assessment. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities do particularly well, as a result of the excellent support they receive.

In the sixth form, A-level results for 2007 showed a 100% pass rate in the great majority of subjects, representing good achievement. There is a rising trend in performance. Lesson observations and the college's assessment records confirm that progress is increasing year on year.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Students' personal development and well-being are outstanding in the main college and in the sixth form. Students identify strongly with the college's values, which underpin the excellent development of spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding. In part this is the result of the many opportunities for reflection, such as in assemblies and thought for the day.

Relationships throughout are very positive: students show respect and consideration for others. Behaviour in lessons and around the college is excellent. Students feel safe and well cared for. They say they like the text system of reporting incidents such as bullying and confirm that the few incidents are dealt with promptly and effectively. Students are aware of cultural issues because they are raised across the curriculum and through, for instance, the links with the African Children's Choir organisation. The college's robust strategies to reduce the number of persistent absentees are having a positive effect. As a result, attendance is improving and is in line with national figures. Nevertheless, the college recognises that, despite its best efforts, there is still more to be done.

Students understand what constitutes a healthy lifestyle and are appreciative of the lunchtime facilities and the many opportunities to participate in sporting activities. Students eagerly take on responsibilities and contribute much to the college and wider community through the form, year and college councils and working with partner primary school pupils, in addition to their many fund-raising activities. Sixth form students are mature, articulate and hard-working. They show awareness of the needs of others and act as good role models. They support younger students very well in lessons and in their nationally recognised peer mentoring programme.

Students are very well prepared for life in the working world through good careers guidance, industry days, business mentors, work experience and enterprise activities. They work with others willingly and eagerly. Specialist college status has helped improve work-related enrichment opportunities and community links.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching and learning are good throughout the college. A significant proportion of lessons are outstanding. Resources arising from the college's specialist status are used well to promote teaching and learning. For example, teachers confidently and effectively use computer technology to aid the preparation and delivery of lessons. Planning is thorough and based on excellent information about students' needs. There is mutual respect between teachers and students and relationships are excellent. Consequently, almost all lessons are conducted in a harmonious and purposeful atmosphere so that time is used well. Students make the greatest progress in lessons where they are engaged by a range of activities and because teachers make them think for themselves. In outstanding lessons these features are enhanced by the teachers' infectious enthusiasm for the subject. In some satisfactory lessons, there is limited discussion and teachers do not always challenge students to develop their own ideas and think more deeply about the subject-matter.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum is outstanding in the main college and good in the sixth form. It is continuously reviewed and adapted to take account of students' changing needs. It makes a very strong contribution to students' personal development. Specialist college status has had a positive impact on the range of subjects available. Extensive curriculum links with local primary schools

and the community have been developed. There is a very good range of both academic and vocational courses. At Key Stage 4 students have a wide range of guided choices. A strong alternative curriculum, including a reduced programme with additional learning support, enables the college to tailor choices to meet individual needs very well.

The high proportion of students who opt to continue with their education after Key Stage 4 reflects well on provision. The sixth form curriculum is generally well matched to individual needs, but the college recognises that there is scope for more vocational courses. The college provides students with an impressive variety of extra-curricular activities. These are well attended, extend learning and make a valuable contribution to students' personal development and enjoyment. In the sixth form the opportunities for curriculum enrichment are a strength that students appreciate - as a number commented, 'We're going to uni next year and we can cook a meal!'

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Students are overwhelmingly positive about the information both they and their parents receive, which helps them to make curriculum choices and to do their best. Arrangements for child protection and for safeguarding are appropriate. Vulnerable students and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make very good progress as a result of the excellent support provided by the college. Any underachievement is speedily identified through the college's outstanding academic monitoring and support systems. Prompt action is taken to support and improve progress.

The progress of different groups of students is closely monitored. Excellent working relationships with external agencies ensure students benefit from a wide range of support. Good use is made of the Assisi centre - a withdrawal facility for students having difficulties - in ensuring that disruption to lessons through poor behaviour is kept to a minimum. Students in the centre are well supported by a range of specialist staff in reflecting on their behaviour so that progress in lessons is maintained. Monitoring of students attending the centre indicates a high success rate in improving behaviour.

Relationships between students and between students and staff make students feel valued, listened to and positive about seeking help if required.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

There is a consistent and successful focus on raising the effectiveness of the college. At its heart is the headteacher's passionate commitment to raising the aspirations and achievement of students from all backgrounds and abilities. All colleagues provide unstinting support for the headteacher's vision. A strong sense of teamwork characterises leadership, with collaboration at senior level a major strength. Professional development is excellent and rigorously targeted on where improvements are needed. Subject and other middle-level leaders have been helped to develop an impressive range of evaluation skills that enable them to analyse successfully the effectiveness of their areas of responsibility. Accountability is firmly established through

the consistent application of hard-edged systems for tracking students' progress, achieving extremely challenging targets and evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and learning. The excellent governing body is a key partner in the college's successful strategic planning. It has played an important role in establishing the vastly improved buildings and facilities and has shown understanding of the college's needs through astute appointments and rigorous challenge. Financial management is very secure and spending is sharply focused on raising standards. The college provides excellent value for money. In the sixth form, evaluation is excellent and well targeted new developments are evolving to improve outcomes further.

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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?	1	2
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?	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	1

Achievement and standards

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

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	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	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	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	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

Inspection of St John Plessington Catholic College, Bebington, CH63 7LF

Thank you very much for the courtesy you showed us when we visited your college recently. We enjoyed talking to so many of you and hearing about your life in the college. You will be pleased to know that we agree with you that the college is outstanding. We were pleased to see such consistently good behaviour that contributes a great deal to the calm and happy atmosphere in the college.

Standards are rising rapidly and your achievement as you move up through the college is excellent. There are a number of reasons for this, not least that everyone gets on so well with each other. Leadership and management of the college are outstanding and producing improvements that you and your parents recognise. You are taught well so that you enjoy learning. The curriculum is first-rate. The wide range of extra-curricular activities provides opportunities for everyone to discover interests and talents. We were impressed that virtually everyone we spoke to knew how well they were doing and what to do to improve - this is a big factor in the progress that you make. It was good to hear from so many of you that your teachers encourage you to raise your sights and help you to do better. By keeping your targets in mind you can continue to help yourselves improve.

It was clear from talking to you that you feel well cared for by all in the college and helped to develop confidence in yourselves. There are lots of excellent contributions made by many students to the college and the wider community, showing care for others. The way that sixth-formers help younger students to settle in and make progress in classes is particularly admirable.

Part of our job is to recommend ways in which schools can improve what they do. We have not done so here because the senior management team already knows what needs doing and has plans to continue the college's improvement.

Thank you again for helping us with our work. We wish you well for the future and hope that you will all continue to play your part in making the college an excellent place to learn.