

Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	106376
Local Authority	Trafford
Inspection number	309111
Inspection dates	11–12 June 2008
Reporting inspector	Vincent Ashworth HMI

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	777
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr John Mulholland
Headteacher	Mr J Cornally
Date of previous school inspection	27 September 2004
School address	Urban Road Altrincham Cheshire WA15 8HT
Telephone number	0161 9118090
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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

Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic College is a smaller than average sized school. It is a popular school and demand for places is very high. The school's intake is influenced by the presence of grammar and private schools in the local area. It serves a community that includes some areas with high levels of social and economic deprivation. Most pupils are of White British heritage. There are small but increasing numbers of pupils from a wide range of other minority ethnic groups. The number of pupils eligible for free school meals is around the national average. The number of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is higher than average, as is the number of pupils with statements of special educational need. The school has been a specialist maths and computing college for the last five years. The school has received three School Achievement Awards, two Football Association Charter Standard Awards and the Specialist Schools Award for Outstanding Value Added Results.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic College is an outstanding school. The school has created an inclusive ethos which encourages all pupils to achieve their best. Parents are overwhelmingly positive about the school. One parent succinctly summed up what inspectors saw when she wrote, 'My child has blossomed and grown in confidence beyond anything I could have imagined: my child has changed beyond recognition.'

Senior leaders have added a rigorous and successful focus on raising academic standards and achievement to the school's long tradition of excellent support for pupils' care and welfare. The school's systems for monitoring pupils' individual progress and development are exemplary. Consequently, every teacher has an in-depth understanding of their pupils' individual needs. Teaching is consistently of high quality: it enables pupils to make excellent progress. This means that by the time pupils complete their compulsory education, standards are above average and this represents outstanding achievement. Senior managers are relentless in their drive to raise achievement and standards and rightly recognise that more work needs to be done to ensure that pupils' achievement in English at Key Stage 3 improves still further.

Pupils demonstrate a real pride in the school's Roman Catholic traditions, which are at the heart of the remarkable personal development that pupils demonstrate.

They grow as mature, independent and self-confident young people with a strong community conscience. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is a substantial strength of the school and contributes strongly to its distinctive 'family' atmosphere. Through this, and a very well planned and taught programme for personal, social and health education, pupils are prepared well for life after leaving school. The strong and collaborative working relationships between teachers and pupils contribute enormously to pupils' excellent behaviour, positive attitudes to learning and their enjoyment of school life.

The school's specialist status in mathematics and computing is being used outstandingly well to underpin the steeply rising standards and achievement and establish strong links with the local community. Outstanding leadership and management of the specialist status ensure that resources and training are targeted across the school to have a profound impact on the quality of teaching and learning which as a consequence, is driving up standards. The school has fully met its demanding specialist school targets.

Governors and senior managers have a strong track record of improvement and are very clear on what and how the school can do better. This, combined with an inspirational headteacher, highly committed staff, supportive parents and a clearly focused school improvement plan, indicates that the school has outstanding capacity to improve.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise achievement in English for younger pupils.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Pupils come to the school with standards that are broadly average: the proportion of pupils at both the highest and lowest ability range is lower than that found nationally. Pupils make expected progress in Key Stage 3 and their results in national tests are broadly average. Pupils

make better progress in mathematics and science than they do in English and, consequently, standards are slightly lower in English than they should be.

Pupils' learning accelerates significantly in Key Stage 4 and, consequently, they make excellent progress. This is underpinned by particularly effective checking of their progress and highly effective individual support. In 2007 the school ranked in the top 9% nationally for the progress made from Year 7 to Year 11. The increase in the proportion of pupils gaining five or more good grades at GCSE has been remarkable. School data predicts that the school will harvest an even stronger set of GCSE results in 2008. Pupils' achievement in information and communication technology (ICT), mathematics and physical education (PE) are outstanding. In 2007 results in GCSE English were below expectations. Inspection evidence and school data show that standards have improved in English at Key Stage 4. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve particularly well: because of the well-targeted support and care they receive they make outstanding progress. The school is rightly focussing on initiatives to ensure that girls and the more able pupils do as well as they possibly can. Data provided by the school indicate that girls now make significantly better progress and a higher proportion of the more able pupils are predicted to gain the very highest grades in their GCSE examinations. Challenging targets, high expectations and close monitoring ensure that nobody leaves school without a qualification.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Pupils' personal development is outstanding. The school's mission statement, 'A desire for excellence and the education of the whole person.' is reflected in all aspects of pupils' experience. They have a strong sense of belonging and fully appreciate the support they receive. 'School is like one big family.' is a view voiced by numerous pupils. They rightly take a pride in their school. These factors are evidenced by the high degree to which pupils enjoy and show interest in their work and their good attendance levels. Relationships and attitudes are characterised by mutual respect. Behaviour is exemplary. Pupils have a clear sense of right and wrong and develop a strong awareness of other cultures through activities such as pen-friend connections with a partner school in Uganda. They have a well tuned awareness of moral and social issues. Consequently, pupils develop confidence, maturity and self-esteem.

Pupils feel safe, secure and valued. They are well integrated into consultative processes that evaluate provision and contribute to decision making. They are encouraged to adopt healthy lifestyles and a very high proportion of pupils are actively involved in a wide variety of sporting activities. The effective interaction between the school and its community is mutually beneficial and significantly enhances pupils' personal development. The school ensures that pupils are very well prepared for the world of work or further academic study. Their future economic well-being is successfully underpinned by effective careers guidance, work experience and the emphasis given to interacting with modern technology.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

There is very little teaching that is less than good and a high proportion which is exemplary. Teachers organise their lessons so that every pupil can play a full and active role, regardless of their level of confidence or ability. They have excellent knowledge of their subjects and can bring them to life in exciting ways. A consistent feature seen by inspectors was that teachers

have very high expectations of all pupils and communicate this through their enthusiasm and commitment. Teachers focus on all the positive things that their pupils achieve. As a result, pupils gain a sense of pride in their learning and are motivated to do their very best. The school promotes best practice in teaching and learning and supports teachers especially well in developing their classroom practice.

In the very best lessons learning objectives are clearly explained to pupils so that both teachers and pupils can evaluate progress and the quality of learning. There are many examples of teachers pushing the boundaries of teaching and learning and introducing innovative practice into their classrooms. In some subjects, for example, history, ICT, mathematics and religious education (RE), information and learning technology is used in ways that captures pupils' imagination and interest. Consequently, results in these subjects are excellent.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The school has created a shortened Key Stage 3, which consists of Year 7 and 8 pupils who follow a curriculum that is broad and balanced and meets statutory requirements. In Years 9 to 11, a very wide range of GCSE and vocational courses is offered and the provision of courses off-site at the local college is satisfying pupils' varied needs, interests and aspirations. Provision for modern foreign languages is much richer than one would normally see. Opportunities for pupils to develop their particular talents and interests are excellent, including those who are identified as gifted and talented. Provision in ICT is impressive and has much improved since the last inspection as a result of the Specialist College Status. The curriculum is supported well by the school's intranet site which encourages pupils to interact and engage with virtual learning technology. This facility is much appreciated by pupils. The school successfully encourages wide participation in enrichment activities such as trips, visits abroad and retreats which contribute significantly to pupil's enjoyment and personal development.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

The school provides outstanding care, support and guidance for all its pupils. Arrangements to support vulnerable pupils and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are excellent. The guidance offered by the school is sensitive and very well coordinated. It is very effective in promoting pupils' well-being. Procedures for safeguarding and child protection are thorough and secure. Parents are very appreciative of the high quality of teacher involvement in supporting pupils. They are well informed about their children's progress, in terms of both their academic and pastoral progress. A rigorous system is in place to set pupils their learning targets and this is followed by a highly effective system of tracking progress. Consequently, areas of concern are speedily identified and acted upon. Pupils are aware of how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve.

Guidance arrangements are thorough. Pupils feel they are given valuable information and support when selecting optional subjects, both by the school and the Connexions service. Year 11 pupils are similarly well supported in preparing for further education or work when they leave school. The very high proportion opting to further their education reflects very well on their experience at Blessed Thomas Holford.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Leadership and management are outstanding. The headteacher provides the school with a rock solid rationale for its work and a crystal clear vision for its future. Leaders and managers at all levels are relentless in the pursuit of improvement and proactive in tackling any barriers. For example, successful bidding for funding to improve sporting facilities means the school now has resources which are of the very highest calibre. Teachers and pupils are proud of belonging to the school. Everyone works together outstandingly well as a team in pursuit of excellence. Procedures for evaluating the overall effectiveness of the school are thorough. The views of a wide range of stakeholders, including those of parents and pupils, give the school an accurate view of its strengths and areas where it could do even better. The school improvement plan is a model of clarity in identifying priorities for action. Robust monitoring of progress results in managers at all levels knowing what is expected of them and what they need to do to implement the responsibilities assigned to them. The school is popular and highly regarded in the community it serves. Parents are strongly supportive of the school and value highly the education it provides. The excellence of leadership and management extends to the school's specialist status which is having a profound impact on raising standards and achievement. Outstanding governance is supportive, well informed and holds the school rigorously to account for its effectiveness.

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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?	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	2
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	2
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?	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1
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

Inspection of Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic College, Altrincham,
WA15 8HT

On behalf of the inspectors and myself, I would like to thank you for your very warm welcome we received during our recent visit to your school. I was pleased that so many of your parents took the time to complete the questionnaire we sent. The overwhelming majority of parents are highly supportive of the school and Mr Cornally's strong leadership.

We think your school is outstanding. You are really lucky to be at a school that is as good as this. Your GCSE results show that you make excellent progress to build upon what you had already achieved at your previous schools. I was particularly impressed by the high quality of some of your work in mathematics, information and communication technology (ICT), history, physical education and religious education. I noticed that achievement in English was not as high in the lower school as it was in the upper school and have asked the school to improve this.

You behave extremely well and are respectful of each other and your teachers. You are also well aware of the need to keep fit and healthy and your successes in team sports are a credit to you. Your teachers have very high expectations of you - and you certainly live up to them. What makes your school such a special place is the high quality of teaching, care and support you receive from your teachers. They are very committed to making sure you achieve your full potential. The school's outstanding track record in ICT and mathematics makes sure you are well placed for the next stage of your education or career.

Many of you said to me that being in school was like being part of a family. I feel very privileged for having been part of that 'family' for a short while.