

St Thomas More

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109698
Local Authority	BEDFORDSHIRE LA
Inspection number	310069
Inspection dates	14–15 November 2007
Reporting inspector	Margaret Jones 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	12–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	879
6th form	185
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Jim McGivern
Headteacher	Mr Alan Lee
Date of previous school inspection	31 January 2005
School address	Tyne Crescent Brickhill Bedford Bedfordshire MK41 7UL
Telephone number	01234 400222
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Age group	12-19
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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

St Thomas More is a Catholic Upper School situated to the north of Bedford town. It is one of four schools within the Catholic Federation in Bedford. Overall 53% of students come from a minority ethnic background and many of these speak English as an additional language. A slightly higher proportion of students than usual have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The school has successfully gained a number of national awards including: Investors in People, Investors in People Leadership and Management Award, the Inclusion Mark, Basic Skills Literacy and Numeracy Award, the FA Schools Charter and the Financial Management Standards Mark. The school has Healthy Schools status, is an Oracle Training Academy and a centre for Young Enterprise.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

St Thomas More is a good school with some outstanding features. The school has improved dramatically in recent years. The Catholic ethos is strong throughout the school and embraces the diversity of student cultures. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. The school is a very caring and inclusive community where students feel safe. They receive a wide range of support, through the outstanding work of the Emmaus Centre. Staff are committed and dedicated. Parents echo this view and many comment about the excellent level of care their children receive. As one parent remarked 'The warmth, friendship, interest and general sense of immediate inclusion in the school and its life has made my child grow in confidence.' Students' personal development, including their attendance and behaviour are good. They know how to keep healthy by eating the right food and taking exercise, and they enjoy the wide range of clubs and sporting activities provided. They make a positive contribution to both the local Catholic and the wider community and are well prepared for adult life.

Students make good progress by the time they leave school. GCSE examination results have continued to rise and are in line with the national average. The school is working hard to raise achievement and standards by the end of Year 9. It has put in a place a number of strategies to strengthen boys' achievement, which does not match the rapid progress made by girls.

Teaching is good overall. Teaching and learning are monitored consistently across the school. The curriculum in both the main school and sixth form has considerable strengths that outweigh those aspects that need further development. The school is well led and managed. The headteacher, who has been in post for three years, has transformed the school by his determination to raise standards. He has provided a clear vision and successfully communicated this to both staff and students. As a result, the school has a friendly, harmonious ethos where students enjoy their learning. He is well supported by the relatively new senior leadership team and the governing body. The school has an outstanding capacity to improve further and a clear view of its priorities for development. The school has achieved a great deal in the last two years.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Overall, provision in the sixth form is satisfactory with strengths in care and support and its contribution to students' personal and social development. Current efforts to improve standards are beginning to have positive effects. Standards are below the national average and this represents satisfactory progress for students, given their starting points. All students are successful in both GCE Advanced and BTEC 1st courses though the proportion getting high grades is below that found nationally.

Students appreciate the wide range of courses and comment positively on the excellent, new study facilities that have created a positive and purposeful learning environment. Many students show considerable personal responsibility through their involvement in school affairs, mentoring of other students and community service. But a few students are not as punctual and hardworking as they could be. Students feel well supported by tutors and subject teachers well and appreciate the good higher education guidance that encourages most to go to university.

There is a good range of GCE courses but too many students struggle with the academic demands these make of them. The one-year BTEC courses are successful and are being increased but the school does not provide enough higher level vocational courses. Teaching and learning are

satisfactory and good in some courses. Teachers are well informed and committed to students' progress but lessons do not consistently reflect the often high standard of lesson planning and assessment found elsewhere in the school.

Leadership and management are satisfactory. However, the recent improvements in the respective sixth form management roles demonstrate a good capacity to improve further. The new learning facilitator and standards leaders have swiftly created a positive learning ethos, and are improving the process of student monitoring and target setting.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve achievement and standards in the sixth form by greater consistency in teaching and learning and in monitoring students' progress.
- Raise the achievement of boys to match more closely the very good progress made by girls.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Achievement is good in the main school. When students enter the school their attainment in English, mathematics and science is significantly below average. This partly reflects the relatively high number of students that join the school mid-year and are at an early stage of learning to speak English. The most recent national test results, at the end of Year 9 are below average. However, students make good progress from their starting points and there is considerable improvement from previous years. The good progress continues into Years 10 and 11 and is reflected currently in the students' work and the school's records. Progress made in English is particularly good as a result of some dynamic and inspirational teaching of the subject. The proportion of students gaining 5 or more grades A*-C was close to the national average in 2007 and this represented a considerable increase compared with the previous two years when the proportion was significantly below average.

In 2007, the results, at the end of Year 9, showed that the progress of boys and girls was quite similar. However, the GCSE results and progress of boys did not match the very good performance of girls. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those in the later stages of learning English make good progress in common with other students because of teachers' careful planning and good support in class from teaching assistants. Additional arrangements are made for language specialists to help those with very little command of English, so that in the initial stages progress in acquiring English skills is very good.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Relationships between students and with staff are exceptional; leading to social and racial harmony. As a result bullying and racist incidents are very rare. The school takes prompt and effective action should they occur. Students have a deep awareness of spirituality fostered by the chaplaincy team and the assembly programme. Students enjoy their lessons, demonstrate respect for each other and have positive attitudes to learning. They appreciate the opportunities for development provided by the school both academically and socially. They feel that their views are listened to and value their school and year councils. Behaviour is good, both in lessons

and around the school. Attendance has improved over the last three years as a result of continuous emphasis placed on it by the school. The school has exceeded its Department for Children, Schools and Families targets for attendance.

Students feel safe, and are clear about how to stay safe in the wider community. They develop good personal skills, making an effective contribution to both the school and wider community through, for instance, charitable work. Students take advantage of opportunities available for developing healthy eating and exercise habits. Many students take part in sporting and physical activities out of school time. The school has recently gained Healthy School status. Students respond very positively when given opportunities to take a lead in class or work collaboratively. They have a good awareness of economic issues, which is fostered by business enterprise days in Year 10 and participation in Young Enterprise schemes.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Teaching and learning are good overall. Warm and respectful relationships result in good classroom control and discipline. Teachers plan lessons well with clear learning objectives, and provide sufficient structured support for students to make good progress. For example, in a Year 11 leisure and tourism lesson students worked well in groups devising solutions for customer service problems. Because of the clear instructions the teacher gave, both verbal and written, students thoroughly enjoyed completing the task and were able to feed back confidently at the end of the lesson.

Teachers make very effective use of information and communication technology both in lessons and for administration. For instance, all the schemes of work and lesson plans for English are on the computer system for ease of access. Students' work is marked regularly and teachers give useful guidance as to how they can improve their work. The school accurately monitors the quality of teaching and supports weaker teachers with coaching and mentoring.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

All students follow a well developed learning programme in Years 8 and 9 that leads to a good and developing range of course options in Years 10 and 11. Sixth form students benefit from a wide range of A-level courses together with considerable enhancement through community service and sports activities.

Careers and enterprise education are good with effective use of local industrial and commercial links, particularly for those following vocational and business studies courses. The applied GCSE and other vocationally related courses are popular and enable students to make good progress. However, the school has yet to establish higher level vocational sixth form courses that would better meet the needs of students, improve standards, and encourage younger students of all abilities to take up these vocational routes.

The school draws students from a wide range of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and succeeds in developing students' awareness of and sensitivity to this cultural diversity through

well-planned opportunities in all subjects to explore and discuss different values and issues. The school is similarly concerned to ensure that the considerable number of students with developing English language skills and students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, make good progress through careful curriculum planning including additional learning support and college link courses.

Students comment positively about the opportunities for lunchtime and after school activities as well as other out of school activities and visits. It is now working with other local schools to extend this provision.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students speak very highly of the exemplary care, guidance and support they receive throughout the school. Students' concerns are dealt with swiftly and there are robust systems in place for child protection. Procedures for safeguarding health and safety are thorough and the school routinely elicits students' views on matters that affect them. The school works closely with parents in particular, through the parents' forums. The Emmaus Centre provides a high level of care and support for students with a wide variety of individual needs. This work has a positive impact on achievement, contributing significantly to a reduction in the number of exclusions. Information gained through assessment is used carefully to set students' targets. Students know what their targets are and understand about different levels. This stimulates learning and contributes to their progress. Students are well informed about their future options for education and careers and the school liaises well with other agencies.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The headteacher's drive and ambition are outstanding. He has set a clear direction for the school, which, in his words, is 'an unstinting desire to be the best'. Since his arrival at the school, he has worked together with senior staff to greatly improve the quality of teaching and raise funds for training, new resources and buildings. This has had a positive impact on the learning environment and the morale of staff and students. Heads of department contribute significantly to the improving standards and good achievement because of the attention they give to monitoring students' progress, particularly in Years 10 and 11. This aspect is weaker for younger students and in the sixth form. The school has played a leading role in the federation of four Catholic schools and has excellent links with a range of partners that has improved provision. Plans to improve provision further include a bid for specialist college status in humanities.

The school's self-evaluation is accurate overall and its monitoring of teaching is robust. Governors make a good contribution to the school's improving standards and achievement. They have an accurate understanding of its work, are very supportive and ask perceptive and relevant questions to assist them in decision making. Financial planning is a strength. Governors and the school's business manager work well together and have used their expertise to recover from a financial deficit. The school now gives good 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	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?	2	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?	1	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	2

Achievement and standards

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

16 November 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of St Thomas More Catholic School, Bedford, MK417UL

Thank you for all the help you gave us when we visited your school. The inspectors enjoyed talking with you and seeing you at work. You were mature and courteous in the way you spoke with each of us.

Your school is a good and improving school, with some outstanding features. You make good progress by the time you leave school and you are well taught. The guidance and support you receive are outstanding and you respond with positive attitudes towards each other and to your work. We were particularly impressed with the respect and consideration you show each other whatever your religion or race. Your spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. The school has very successfully embraced a wide range of different cultures. Staff are very committed and dedicated and your parents agree. The school is well led by the headteacher and senior team and there is a good team spirit among the staff and governors, who all want you all to do your very best.

We have asked your school, with your help, to improve the achievement of boys so that it more closely matches girls' progress, and to improve standards and achievement in the sixth form. We know how involved the school council has been in many aspects of the life and work of your school. We are confident, therefore, that you can help to bring about further improvements.

The headteacher, teachers, governors and staff are highly committed to their work and know that your school has the potential to do even better. We wish all of you success in your studies and thank you once again for your help with this inspection.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Jones

Her Majesty's Inspector