

St Bernard's Catholic School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110516
Local Authority	Buckinghamshire
Inspection number	310343
Inspection dates	10–11 October 2007
Reporting inspector	Janet Mercer HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Modern (non-selective)
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	642
6th form	85
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Maggi Bull
Headteacher	Mr Robert Simpson
Date of previous school inspection	13 October 2003
School address	Daws Hill Lane High Wycombe HP11 1PW
Telephone number	01494 535196
Fax number	01494 446523

Age group	11-18
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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 Bernard's Catholic School serves the Catholic community of High Wycombe. It is a smaller than average non-selective secondary modern school, in a local authority which has a mix of selective grammar schools and non-selective upper schools. Pupils' prior attainment when they join the school is broadly average. The proportion eligible for free school meals is lower than average. There are more pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds than usual. The percentage of those with English as an additional language is a little lower than average as is the proportion of pupils identified with learning difficulties or disabilities or who have identified special educational needs.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

St Bernard's is a satisfactory and improving school. In a short time the strong and focused leadership of the headteacher and his senior team has set a clear and purposeful direction for the school. There is very strong emphasis on raising the achievement and supporting pupils' personal development. Some improvement in GCSE results has already taken place, although there is still inconsistency between subjects. The majority of parents are very supportive of the school, saying that the strong Catholic ethos provides a caring and supportive environment for their children.

Pupils enjoy school, particularly when lessons are interesting and challenging. They appreciate the opportunities the school provides for them and are enthusiastic about the wide range of activities in which they can develop their talents. The school's productive partnerships with external organisations and the local community contribute positively to their learning and personal development. The school is inclusive and pupils learn to respect each other's culture and backgrounds. As one pupil said, 'it is easy to make friends because we all get on'.

Pupils make good progress in Years 7 to 9 and achieve good results in national tests in Year 9. This is not always sustained in Key Stage 4. In 2006 pupils in Year 11 did not make sufficient progress, especially in English. Whilst the proportion who achieved five or more A*-C grades at GCSE was higher than average, the proportion achieving five or more A*-C grades including English and mathematics was below the national average. The A*-C pass rate was a little below national averages in English and further below in mathematics.

In 2007 pupils' results improved in Year 11 and this group made better progress overall. More pupils achieved five or more good GCSEs than the previous year. While the proportion who achieved five or more A*-C passes including English and mathematics also improved, this remained below the national average. Pass rates in mathematics improved significantly but they declined further in English, where progress overall remains poor.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall and improving. Initiatives to refine classroom practice are starting to have an impact on the quality of learning, but too much inconsistency remains and there is not yet enough good teaching.

Not all teachers make effective use of available data on pupils' prior attainment to plan for the different needs and abilities of the pupils in their class. In some lessons, the range of teaching and learning strategies used does not maintain pupils' interest or encourage their active participation in their learning.

The headteacher has a good and accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement and high aspirations for the future. Systems for monitoring and evaluating the quality of provision have been strengthened with appropriate actions in place to secure further improvements. The commitment and enthusiasm of leaders at all levels ensures that the school has good capacity to improve further.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The quality of provision in the sixth form is satisfactory. The school provides a supportive learning environment for students, where they are able to develop a good range of personal skills that supports their progression to higher education. They are actively involved in the

wider school community, taking on a range of responsibilities in the school and local community. Working relationships between teachers and pupils are good.

Whilst overall pass rates for AS and A-level courses are below the national average, students make satisfactory progress in relation to their prior attainment, which is below that of many sixth forms. There is considerable variation in pass rates between subjects, particularly at AS-level.

Teaching in the sixth form is satisfactory. Teachers have good subject knowledge, but there are not always sufficient opportunities for pupils to develop independent learning skills. Not all teachers set work that stretches and challenges students to achieve the best they can.

The curriculum on offer is restricted by the size of the sixth form, and includes a range of traditional A-level subjects and a small number of vocational options at level 2. There are a few opportunities for students to take other subjects in other schools and managers recognise the need to work collaboratively to extend the range and type of courses available.

Leadership and management of the sixth form are satisfactory. Whilst there have been improvements in the use of performance data to track and review progress, students report that there is still a lot of variation in setting targets and monitoring progress in different subjects. There has been insufficient emphasis placed on monitoring the quality of sixth form teaching and the work on developing a more appropriate curriculum to better meet the needs of the students at this school is still at an early stage. Senior managers have a clear understanding of the key issues in the sixth form and are implementing appropriate improvement strategies.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the consistency of performance between subjects to raise overall standards at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form.
- Ensure all teachers use appropriate teaching and learning strategies to meet individual students' needs and interests.
- Increase rates of progress in English in Key Stage 4 to raise achievement.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next Section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Achievement and standards are satisfactory. Pupils join the school with broadly average prior attainment and make good progress in Years 7 to 9. Results of national tests in English, mathematics and science are above the national average.

Although there are indications that progress in Years 10 and 11 has improved in 2007, there is still considerable variation in the performance between subjects at GCSE. Whilst several subjects areas demonstrated significant improvements in the number of A*-C grades in 2007, others declined, or remained low. In some subjects, including vocational courses, pass rates are high, but in around half of GCSE subjects they are below average. Most Year 11 pupils achieve a qualification in adult literacy and numeracy. Three quarters achieve level 2 literacy and around half achieve level 2 numeracy.

Pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities make satisfactory progress. Good support given to those with a statement of special educational needs enables these pupils to make good progress. The school has identified some pockets of underachievement for small groups of pupils, for example, those of Black Caribbean heritage. A mentoring programme is helping to support these pupils, though it is too early to determine its impact on their achievement.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Pupils' personal development is good. The school's religious character provides strong support for spiritual and moral development. Behaviour is mostly good in class and good around the school. Pupils say that they know what to do about any bullying, which is taken seriously and dealt with quickly. Attendance is satisfactory but the school is working hard to improve this and has succeeded in reducing the amount of unauthorised absence.

Pupils know the importance of staying safe. They are made aware of how to be healthy but need to take more responsibility for adopting a healthy lifestyle. While some pupils take advantage of the extra-curricular sports provision, the number is not as high as might be expected.

At all stages, they willingly take on many different responsibilities in school and the wider community. They feel that their views are taken seriously and that they can have an impact on the way in which the school develops. Pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities and those with English as an additional language are able to participate fully in all aspects of school life such as being members of an effective school council.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Teaching and learning are satisfactory. In the most successful lessons expectations are high and teachers plan challenging and stimulating learning activities which match the pupils' needs and abilities and sustain their interest. The learning environment is enhanced by the excellent, relaxed relationships between teachers and pupils. In less successful lessons, the pace is slow and tasks do not always match pupils' needs. Consequently, they are not sufficiently motivated and challenged and occasionally behaviour deteriorates. These lessons occur when teachers have not fully taken on board the school's policy on planning and assessment.

However, teachers are increasingly making sure that pupils know what they are expected to learn and are giving them more opportunities to learn independently. Through their marking, many teachers are giving pupils sound guidance on how they can improve their work and meet their targets. Some also expect pupils to evaluate their own and others' work. Good support is provided for pupils who have particular needs, ensuring that they make at least satisfactory progress. Good and effective use is made of information and communication technology (ICT) to support learning across the curriculum.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The curriculum is good in the main school and satisfactory in the sixth form. The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum that meets all statutory requirements and is generally well matched to pupils' needs and abilities.

There are good opportunities for enrichment in a wide range of areas and activities are well attended and contribute to pupils' enjoyment. They respond well because the school takes into account the fact that many pupils travel some distance to and from school and therefore, in addition to after school clubs, provides lunchtime sessions which are more accessible.

Pupils who will benefit from an alternative curriculum are clearly identified and skilfully guided to participate in other activities. These include SKIDZ (a local course in motor maintenance), alternative courses to GCSE in leisure and tourism and business, programmes in ICT and an applied science course.

All pupils in Year 11 participate in the adult literacy and numeracy qualification that develops their basic skills and helps prepare them for the world of work.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

As individuals, pupils are well known to staff and this gives them a good sense of security. Most parents are supportive of their children and the school. A few parents feel that communications with the school are not as good as they would like.

The transition from primary school is well managed when they enter the school and pupils receive appropriate guidance on further and higher education when they leave. The school deals very well with health and personal safety through a good personal, social, health and citizenship education programme. Procedures for health and safety meet requirements and are regularly reviewed. Child protection arrangements are good, up to date and known to staff.

Academic guidance is satisfactory and improving. The information from assessment and monitoring is being used better to help pupils understand what they could achieve. Targets are set in consultation with pupils. Pupils' progress is now being more effectively monitored, but there is still some way to go before they benefit in full from the changes.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Leadership and management are satisfactory. The headteacher and senior team have identified the key areas for development and good strategies to improve have been put in place. The school's accurate self-evaluation provides a perceptive analysis of strengths and weaknesses.

The quality of teaching and learning is now routinely monitored and evaluated and the outcomes are being used to improve standards and achievement, with some recent successes. Teachers

receive good support to improve the planning and content of their lessons. However, there are still some pockets of underachievement and too much inconsistency in the performance of different subjects in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form. Managers have recently established effective systems to assess and track the progress of learners but it is too early to assess their impact on achievement.

The school's leaders effectively promote equality of opportunity and the personal development and well-being of all pupils. As a result, the school is inclusive and has effective partnerships which support pupils well. The roles of middle managers are now more clearly defined and their collective focus is starting to have a positive impact on achievement. Governors are experienced, give strong support and challenge to senior managers, and so make a significant contribution to the school. In the context of satisfactory pupil achievement, 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	2	2

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	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	3	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	3	
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?	3	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	3
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	2	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3	
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	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

18 October 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of St Bernard's Catholic School, High Wycombe, HP11 1PW

On behalf of the inspectors who visited your school recently, I would like to thank you for making us so welcome and helping us with the inspection. We enjoyed meeting and talking to you, in your lessons and around the school. Many of you and your parents spoke positively about the school. We have taken these views in to account in arriving at our judgement that the school is satisfactory and improving and that the majority of you are making satisfactory progress.

We were impressed by the way you get along with each other and value and respect your different cultural backgrounds. We were pleased to see that more students achieved five or more good passes in 2007 than in previous years. You make satisfactory progress in many, but not all subjects. We have asked the school to make sure you get on well in all GCSE, AS and A-level subjects, and especially in GCSE English, so that standards continue to improve.

We were impressed by your good behaviour around the school, although there are still times when a few students disrupt lessons and this can affect everyone's learning. When you are interested in the topics and teaching involves you fully in the lesson, behaviour is good and you make good progress. We have asked the school to make sure that all teachers use different types of activities to match your different interests and abilities so that you can all enjoy your lessons and achieve as much as you can.

You have a good range of subjects and courses, with some interesting choices for Years 10 and 11. Many of you join in extra curricular activities after school or at lunchtimes and take part enthusiastically in school and community events. In the sixth form, the choice of courses is more limited and the school is working to find ways of increasing the range, and including more vocational options so that you can easily move from Year 11 to the sixth form.

Your headteacher has started to bring about many improvements and managers have high aspirations for the school's future. Your teachers are committed to improving the school further to give you all the best opportunities possible to do well. We have confidence that the school will continue to improve and that you will all do your bit to make it a success.

With best wishes for the future

Janet Mercer

Her Majesty's Inspector