

Saint Michael's Catholic High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117589
Local Authority	HERTFORDSHIRE LA
Inspection number	312663
Inspection date	18 October 2007
Reporting inspector	Lynne Blakelock

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	1068
6th form	186
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Thomas McKinlay
Headteacher	Mr John Murphy
Date of previous school inspection	24 January 2005
School address	High Elms Lane Garston Watford Hertfordshire WD25 0SS
Telephone number	01923 673760
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors. Inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: achievement in English at Key Stage 3, the quality of the curriculum and the impact of humanities specialist status, the effectiveness of assessment procedures in raising standards in all subjects, and the quality of support for students who have particular learning needs. Evidence was collected by observing lessons and the quality of work produced, scrutinising school documentation and records of students' achievement and progress, and by discussions with students and teachers. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

This is a larger than average sized school which is popular and over-subscribed. Most pupils join from seven local Catholic primary schools. Attainment on entry to the school in Year 7 is in line with the national average. The proportion of students entitled to free school meals or who have a statement of special educational need is below average. The proportion with learning difficulties and disabilities is average. The percentage from minority ethnic backgrounds is higher than that found nationally. A below average percentage are learning English as an additional language. The school has specialist school status for humanities. It has been awarded Investors in People status and Sportsmark Gold.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Inspectors confirm the school's evaluation that it is an outstanding school. Parents strongly agree, with several saying that this is a 'wonderful school'. Students make excellent progress and reach exceptionally high standards. Value for money is outstanding. The work of the school is supported and strengthened by its Catholic values which are central to everything that happens in it. They shine through in many of the day's activities.

Leadership and management are outstanding. The excellent performance of the school owes much to the strong leadership of the headteacher. He and his senior team focus rigorously on improving the school's performance. They review the school's work regularly and carefully to identify any areas for improvement and have well reasoned plans to move it further forward. These are evident in the excellent improvements made since the last inspection. This includes the specialist humanities status, which is bringing many opportunities for students to broaden their learning. It includes learning across subjects and is one example of the outstanding capacity that the school has for further improvement. Middle managers are demonstrating very good practice in their subject areas. The regular opportunities that staff are given to update and develop their professional knowledge mean that the school is constantly evolving. Governors lead the school particularly well because they have a very good understanding of its work and are able to challenge how well it is doing.

Students reach exceptional standards in their work. They make outstanding progress between Years 7 and 11. This is largely due to the exceptional support and guidance offered to all students and to the curriculum that offers increasingly interesting ways for students to learn. Their results in GCSE examinations have been consistently above average in recent years and continue to rise. Results were outstanding in 2007 and the percentage attaining 5 A* to C grades was the school's highest ever. This included students from minority ethnic backgrounds who performed at far higher levels than are generally found nationally. Performance at Key Stage 3 is above average in the proportions of students reaching expected levels in English, mathematics and science, showing good progress from students' starting points. Although an above average proportion of students also reach higher than the expected levels in mathematics and science, fewer have done so in English at Key Stage 3. Specialist school targets were achieved in all subjects, except in English for higher attaining students. Staff are already addressing this by increasing speaking and listening opportunities in lessons.

Teaching is good with some outstanding elements and lessons and the excellent guidance and increasingly interesting curriculum enhancing teaching further and resulting in excellent progress. All teachers expect students to work very hard. In the excellent lessons, teachers give detailed advice to students, so they improve the quality of their work. Almost all teachers plan carefully so work is challenging to students, who enjoy learning for themselves and solving problems. In the best lessons, students check and discuss their own work with other pupils. This means that they can develop their critical thinking skills and get ideas how to improve their own work.

The care, guidance and support for students are outstanding. The school is very safe, secure and caring and its students thrive because of this. All procedures to ensure their health and safety are securely in place. The school works very closely with outside agencies so that any students who have worries get prompt help. Academic guidance is equally strong and is significant in the high standards that students reach. Those who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities have very regular reviews of their progress so that many are moving on

rapidly and are reaching their challenging targets. All other students have their work assessed regularly by teachers and they too have individual, challenging targets. They know what they have to do to achieve them. As a result, students have a strong commitment to their learning.

Students enjoy school, as shown by their exemplary behaviour and excellent relationships with each other and with staff. They relish opportunities to be leaders and part of a team. The curriculum contributes to their outstanding personal development because it offers students opportunities to develop enterprise skills which will help them in their working life. They are committed to leading healthy lifestyles, eating healthily and keeping fit. They show great social and moral responsibility and make an exceptional contribution to the local and wider community. An example is the 24,000 pounds they raised during Lent this year to purchase a vehicle for a clinic in Rwanda. Students are continuing to raise money because they are committed to improving the quality of life for people less fortunate. It is faith in action, fulfilling the mission statement of the school 'to bring Christ to all and all to Christ'

The curriculum is outstanding. In particular, it promotes students' achievement exceptionally well. Younger students, for example, develop literacy and numeracy skills in increasingly interesting ways, encouraging quicker progress. Information and communication technology (ICT), which is much improved since the last inspection, is increasingly used to make learning more interactive for all students. At Key Stage 4, they can choose from a wider and diverse range of courses, both academic and vocational. This ensures that they all have a route in their learning that enables them to progress very well. Very popular after-school activities, clubs and visits enable students to extend their learning in the broadest sense.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The effectiveness of the sixth form is good. It is led well by the director who offers a clear structure and direction to its work. The care, guidance and support of students are outstanding. They feel valued and cared for by the school, which guides them exceptionally well in their work and pastorally. This includes an effective mentoring programme to raise achievement. Consequently, students of all abilities are making good progress. The attainment on entry of those who pursue their studies at this level is below the average for sixth forms, yet they reach average standards by the time they leave. Results show a three year upward trend. They meet their targets, apart from specialist school targets in English and Geography for the most able. Teaching is good. Students say that it has improved since the school achieved specialist status because resources are so much better. Teachers' questioning is skilful in helping students to make good progress. The good curriculum offers them a range of vocational and academic courses to suit their individual learning needs and ambitions. Students' personal development is outstanding. They are role models to younger students, supporting their learning and leading by example. They respond to the school's high expectations and generally have high aspirations for the future. Their attitudes and actions demonstrate their pride in their sixth form.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards of more able students in English at Key Stage 3 and post 16.

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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	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1	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	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?	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	2
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

19 October 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of Saint Michael's High School, Watford, WD25 0SS

Thank you for all the help you gave us when we inspected your school recently. We enjoyed our visit very much. We were pleased to have the opportunity to meet you and talk with many of you about the education that the school provides. It was clear to us that you are very proud of your school. Your parents feel the same. This letter will tell you the judgements we have made.

Your school is giving you an outstanding education. This is seen in the exceptionally high standards that you reach and the outstanding progress that you make through the school. You do so well because of good teaching and the excellent way teachers guide you in your learning. The curriculum is excellent. You also enjoy the wide range of visits and the activities after school that broaden your experiences. You know that staff care about you and work very hard for you. We were particularly impressed by the commitment that all year groups show in raising money to support people in Rwanda.

Those of you in the sixth form are making good progress and standards are rising year by year at A2. They are now average. You are excellent role models to the rest of the school and set a fantastic example in helping others. There is a good range of courses to match your needs and interests. The director leads the sixth form well and has good ideas to develop it further.

Mr Murphy is an outstanding headteacher and has very high expectations of you all. He, the staff and governors are always looking for ways to improve. At present they are looking at ways to make sure that the most able students do equally well in all their subjects through the school and sixth form.

On behalf of the inspection team, I wish you continued success.

Lynne Blakelock

Lead inspector