

Saint Joan of Arc Roman Catholic School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117590
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	312664
Inspection date	15 May 2008
Reporting inspector	George Derby

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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1270
6th form	230
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr E McCarroll
Headteacher	Mr Peter Sweeney
Date of previous school inspection	11 October 2004
School address	High Street Rickmansworth Hertfordshire WD3 1HG
Telephone number	01923 773881
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: students' progress and standards across the whole school with a particular focus on English and science in Key Stage 3; how leaders across the school are improving provision; the impact of the school's work in its specialist areas and the support for students' with learning difficulties. The school's work in relation to the curriculum and the improvements required since the last inspection were also inspected. Other aspects were not investigated in detail, but no evidence was found 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. Evidence was gathered from the school's data, students' work, observations of teaching and school life, analysis of parental questionnaires, discussions with staff and students and evidence from displays around the school.

Description of the school

St Joan of Arc Catholic School (St Joan's) is a larger than average comprehensive school which gained specialist status for mathematics and computing in 2003. As the former house of the famous author George Elliot and as a Roman Catholic convent, it has had many forms. It draws its students from a very large geographical area, which includes parts of Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire, as well as from the London Boroughs of Harrow, Hillingdon and Brent.

The percentage of students eligible for free school meals is very low. The majority are of White British origin, although an average proportion come from minority ethnic backgrounds and are mainly Black or Asian. The percentage with English as an additional language is also average. There is a below average percentage of students with learning difficulties, including those with a statement of special educational need. The students' attainment on entry to the school in Year 7 is generally above average, although in some years it is average. Attainment on entry to the sixth form is average. Students often leave St Joan's at the end of Year 11 to continue their studies in their own local area. This is mainly because school transport to St Joan's is not available for sixth form students.

The school's work has been recognised through its receipt of a large number of prestigious awards including the Healthy Schools Award, Charter Mark, Investors in People, ECO Bronze Award, and the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Mark.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

St Joan's is a good school. It judges itself better than this and some judgments in its self evaluation are slightly overgenerous. However, it is developing into an outstanding school because of the dedication, drive, determination and vision of the relatively new headteacher. Its ethos is immediately clear and it is not only a school where high expectations for academic success are apparent, but one which cares passionately for students as individuals and for their spiritual health. Students' personal development and well-being are outstanding because of the exceptional care, guidance and support they receive. Their safeguarding meets requirements. The school and its students pride themselves in the all round education provided and this is clearly evident in their confidence, self-esteem and the excellent relationships and respect they display for each other and for the staff.

This positive outlook is also reflected in the views of the vast majority of parents. They have an overwhelmingly positive view summed up well by the comment, 'my child's good all round education is due to good leadership and management and hardworking staff'. Students are also very positive about the school, especially about the very wide range of extra-curricular activities. They have really good opportunities to contribute to, and make decisions about school life.

Students achieve well academically and in some subjects, such as English in Key Stage 4 last year, their achievement was outstanding. The school's and students' own high expectations result in them attaining standards which are well above average. The school's specialist work not only supports their preparation for future life but also their personal development and communication skills. The percentage of students gaining five or more good GCSEs including English and mathematics, and the best eight GCSE scores, were well above average last year.

The mathematics and computing specialism is a significant strength. The school exceeded all its challenging targets in 2007. The impact across the curriculum is exceptionally strong, with aspects of mathematics and computing being used very well in other subjects. One particularly strong feature is the way ICT is being used to support teaching, such as through Podcasts and Vodcasts. Students' attainment in mathematics and ICT is well above average. Very effective partnerships, as a result of this work, have been established with primary schools and the wider community.

The excellent senior leadership team have pushed forward on all fronts and have made St Joan's what it is today. The team has radically improved how it reflects on the school's performance and takes decisive action to eliminate weaknesses. Teamwork is a particular strength. Improvement has been excellent, and has especially accelerated since the headteacher's arrival. The school is exceptionally well placed to improve further. A particular development, made together with the highly astute and effective governing body, has been the production of a high quality strategic plan for developing the buildings. This has enabled the school to access sources of funding and make radical improvements to its previously poor accommodation. New mathematics and drama buildings are now completed and plans for improving accommodation for materials technology and science are in hand. As a result, the accommodation is now satisfactory overall. In the past two school years, around 30% of teachers left, usually for promotion or retirement and this had a big impact on performance, particularly in English, mathematics and science in Key Stage 3. However, staffing in these departments is now more settled. As a way of successfully attracting and retaining staff, the school has developed a very

strong training programme. This includes in-house courses and accreditation, which enable staff to gain high-level qualifications.

The school has increased its analysis of assessment data, and the senior team has addressed the issue of underachievement in Key Stage 3 that occurred in 2007. The standards at the end of Year 9 have been above average, however the distance students have travelled is not as great as might have been expected. There has been a general decline in achievements since 2005, especially in English. Most of this has been linked to the impact of staffing difficulties, as in mathematics, but some is linked to shortcomings in the accommodation and weaknesses in the curriculum in science and some to inconsistencies in the approach to certain aspects of the English curriculum. Students have strong views about the negative impact of the poor continuity of teaching in science and of their study of topics. The school has now taken action and planning has been revised. As a result, the school's assessment and test data show that students' progress has improved this year.

Students' spiritual, moral and social development is outstanding. Students have considerable support for their spiritual health, as well as opportunities to reflect on their own lives and to support those less fortunate than themselves, for example, through their local charitable work and the fundraising for a school in India. Students' contribution to the school and local and world communities is extremely strong. They are particularly proud of their 'eco' and recycling activities to reduce wastage and the impact of their work through the school council is considerable. Moral and ethical issues are embedded in the curriculum and students are skilfully taught to consider these as part of their lessons. Students' attitudes and behaviour are outstanding. Exclusion from school is very low. A small number of parents expressed some concern over behaviour and bullying, but inspectors found incidents to be few and any that occur are dealt with swiftly. Attendance is above average and students' high level of enjoyment is apparent in lessons and around the school. Opportunities for, and student's understanding of, how to keep healthy and safe, are also outstanding.

Teaching and learning are good. Rigorous monitoring by staff, including middle leaders, gives the school a clear and accurate view of the quality of its teaching. Staff are always well prepared and considerable use is made of ICT to support learning. Lively teaching engages students well and they always respond positively and with interest. The school's work on improving teaching and learning and the use of assessment have had a clear impact and the 'teaching and learning focus groups' help staff disseminate good practice. The work on ensuring that tasks precisely match students' needs is not yet consistent throughout the school but it is clear that it is improving. Some plans outline precisely the different learning tasks for students and in the better lessons activities are well designed to take their differing needs into account. However, this is not always the case despite a very wide range of abilities in some classes.

The curriculum is good. It meets the needs of students and reflects the school's ethos particularly well. Activities relating to the school's specialist status, such as using ICT to support students' learning and revision are evident throughout. The senior team are planning to increase the range of provision, especially as vocational learning on site is limited. However, the school makes effective use of vocational courses provided by partner institutions and ensures a very strong emphasis on work related learning and business enterprise which prepares students exceptionally well for the next stage of their education. The progress of students with learning difficulties is good. This year, the school has effectively used its expertise in the learning support department to provide well-focused help for groups of students in Years 7 and 8 who have specific weaknesses in literacy. About a third of their lessons are taught by learning support specialists and has the effect of accelerating the development of their literacy skills across the

curriculum. In addition, the school provides a good range of activities for gifted and talented students.

The school is well led and managed. Much work has gone into ensuring that form tutors and subject leaders take a greater responsibility for evaluating students' progress. Their effectiveness is now generally good, and they understand their roles in leading and managing subjects. Their analysis of standards is generally leading to departmental improvement although some departments are developing more rapidly than others. Governance is outstanding and the chair is clearly driven by the desire to improve and make this an excellent school. Governors provide considerable challenge and are proud to contribute to the exciting 'sea change', as they describe the impact of the headteacher's improvements. They are highly knowledgeable about the school's strengths and what needs to be done to improve further.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The sixth form is good. From average starting points, the students make good progress to reach above average standards at AS and A level. The school ensures good standards by accurate analysis of students' levels, effective target setting by the sixth form leader, and good teaching.

Students' outstanding personal development is particularly helped by the excellent pastoral and academic support they receive. They are very well informed about the standards they are reaching, their target grades and what they need to do to improve their attainment. They thoroughly enjoy being part of the sixth form with its strong community spirit, and they provide particularly good support to new sixth formers and others in the main school, for example, through mentoring. Retention at A level is high. Sixth form students are regarded as 'ambassadors' for the school, and rightly so!

The leader has a clear view of the strengths and weaknesses of the sixth form and good plans for development. These include the revision of accommodation and curriculum to provide more vocational and work related activities to reflect the increasing range of the intake. The curriculum is good overall and meets most of the current range of student needs well. The school collaborates well with other schools to provide some courses, such as applied business studies, hairdressing and construction.

Students view the enrichment provided in the sixth form as particularly strong. They appreciate the high level of support they get for preparing for university or college.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that staff plan work to meet the needs of all the students in their lessons and that this is undertaken consistently across the school.

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

Achievement and standards

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

16 May 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of St Joan of Arc Catholic School, High Street, Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire WD3 1HG

Thank you for the time you spent showing us around and for the very thoughtful and astute contributions you made in the discussions with inspectors. You made us feel at ease and you are clearly very proud of St Joan's. You told us about how good your school is and how you get an all round education - we agree! As soon as we arrived at the school, we could 'feel' the school's excellent ethos, which is clearly based on Christian principles. Your school was a joy to inspect!

Your personal development is outstanding because of the excellent care, guidance and support you receive, both pastorally and academically. Your high level of fundraising and giving to charities and the support for a leprosy school in India shows the exemplary contribution you make to the local and wider community. You thrive academically and make good progress because of good teaching and an effective programme of activities. The school's specialism of mathematics and computing, together with the excellent preparation you get for future life after school, ensure you are highly prepared for the next steps in your education.

It is clearly evident how highly you are regarded by the headteacher and all the staff and the great commitment they have to wanting you to do your very best. Excellent relationships are built on the mutual respect you have for one another. You make a great contribution to school life and to the very calm learning environment where everyone wants to learn. Your behaviour is excellent and you have extremely positive attitudes; your enthusiasm for learning make lessons a delight. Although some parts of the school are very cramped and some need refurbishment, overall the accommodation is satisfactory. The garden and 'moat' are an excellent resource for your personal reflection.

All these positive things happen because the headteacher and the senior team work exceptionally hard to make your school a better place. They have some really good strategies for the school's future development and we have asked them to ensure that the work planned for you in lessons always meets your differing needs and abilities. This clearly happens in some parts of the school but needs to be consistent across the whole school in order to help you achieve even better than you do.

Best wishes and good luck for the future.

George Derby

Lead inspector