

St Thomas More Catholic College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	124465
Local Authority	Stoke-On-Trent
Inspection number	314939
Inspection dates	12–13 March 2008
Reporting inspector	Davinder Dosanjh 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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1075
6th form	136
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Tony Davies
Headteacher	Nick Finnigan
Date of previous school inspection	31 March 2003
School address	Longton Hall Road Longton Stoke-on-Trent ST3 2NJ
Telephone number	01782 234734
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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 Catholic College is a larger than average school. It serves mainly the south of Stoke-on-Trent and its surrounding area, though students come from all parts of the city. Students represent a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. Over 80% of the students are White British, and the other students come from a range of minority ethnic backgrounds with the largest group being of Pakistani origin. The proportions of students known to be eligible for free school meals and with a learning difficulty and/or disability are just below average. The proportion of students for whom English is an additional language is below average but has been increasing. Approximately 50% of students in the sixth form qualify for the educational maintenance allowance. The school became a specialist mathematics and computing college in September 2004.

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 Catholic College is a good school where every student is known and cared for well. It is an inclusive school, which promotes the development of students both personally and academically within a Catholic ethos. Students have positive attitudes to learning and enjoy the many opportunities provided by the school. There are good relationships between staff and students. Behaviour and attendance are good. The school has worked hard to reinforce good behaviour and high levels of attendance and has used celebration assemblies to support this work. The school is one of the first in the country to achieve the national Every Child Matters award at silver level, confirming its strong commitment to the well-being of all its young people. Students make a good contribution to the community through local, national and international charity work. The student council is very active and played a key role in designing and developing the Angels Walk-Way, an outdoor learning environment. Pastoral support is a strong feature of the school. Parental responses to the inspection questionnaire were overwhelmingly positive about the care, support and education that their children receive. As one parent put it, 'The school values every child, giving him or her individual care and attention.' Students too are appreciative of the encouragement and guidance of their teachers and support staff. In the words of a Year 8 student, 'There is always someone there for you.'

Achievement is good. Students make good progress by the end of Year 11. Standards have been well above average and the school has improved its performance significantly since 2002. Despite the recent decline in GCSE results, current progress made by Year 11 students shows the school is back on track to raise standards further. The school uses data very effectively to track and monitor the progress of students. There are good intervention strategies in place to target students who underachieve or who are on the borderline between grades.

Teaching and learning are good overall. There are examples of outstanding teaching where a range of learning strategies creates a buzz in lessons. The teaching and learning group are making an important contribution to further improving teaching and learning by the use of flexible teaching days, encouraging a range of approaches to be used. Independent learning and students' participation in lessons are not fully embedded across all subjects. While there are good examples of marking in the school, it does not always clearly explain what students could do to improve further.

Mathematics and computing specialist status has brought many benefits to the school and its students, who make good progress in both these subjects. The curriculum is broad and continually being developed to meet the needs of individual students. The school has improved information and communication technology (ICT) resources in all year groups. The use of creative partnerships has enabled video and editing work to be developed. A small number of Year 10 students take GCSE mathematics a year early and have been very successful in achieving high grades. Links with primary schools have been developed well. Five local primary schools take part in the enhanced curriculum, with very able Year 6 students coming into the school for extra mathematics.

The headteacher and senior management provide clear direction and leadership. They are well supported by middle managers. This has helped the school to secure improvements in achievement and improve teaching and learning since the last inspection. The school is reflective, and approaches to school improvement involve a wide range of staff. The school has a clear

understanding of its strengths and areas for improvement and has a good capacity to improve further.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The sixth form provides a satisfactory quality of education. Pass rates for A-level courses have remained steady but AS-level pass rates have been improving, and in particular more students are achieving higher grades. Based on their GCSE results, students make satisfactory progress, but there are pockets of underachievement in sciences and mathematics. However, current progress in these subjects indicates that students are on course to do better this year. Teaching is satisfactory overall. Some is good, but insufficient focus on assessment and the development of examination skills prevents it from being better than this. Sixth form students are very good role models for younger students and take on many responsibilities and leadership roles such as organising Year 7 discos and raising money for charity through the St Vincent de Paul society. Students also successfully complete additional courses in management, community sports leadership and British Sign Language. They are very positive about the support from teachers, personal tutors and learning mentors, who they say provide very good one-to-one help and guidance. Pastoral support is strong and led very well by the head of sixth form. The success of the sixth form has been to raise aspirations so that in 2007 some 90% of students went on to university. Attendance is high at over 90%. The curriculum offers a range of academic courses but a limited choice of vocational courses, with developing collaboration with local schools and colleges. Leadership and management are satisfactory overall. The school has implemented a number of strategies to improve achievement and they are starting to have an impact. The changes in entry criteria to sixth form courses, the more rigorous tracking of students' progress and the use of the study centre for timetabled independent study have led to an improvement in recent module examinations.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the progress made by students in the sixth form on their academic courses so more meet or exceed their target grades.
- Ensure teaching strategies consistently engage students to be active and independent learners and challenge more able students.
- Ensure marking consistently provides clear and specific guidance on how to improve.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Students enter the school with attainment that is broadly average. The academic progress that students make from joining the school to the end of Year 11 is good overall. Results in national tests at the end of Year 9 in 2007 were the best ever in English with more students obtaining the higher National Curriculum Levels 6 and 7. While the percentage of students reaching the nationally expected Level 5 was above average for science and mathematics, the proportion reaching the higher levels shows an inconsistent pattern over the last few years with a decline in 2007.

The percentage of students achieving five or more GCSE passes at grades A* to C has been well above average for some years but this has been slowly falling, from 81% in 2005 to 70%

in 2007. Alongside this there has been a drop in the percentage of students achieving five or more GCSE passes at grades A* to C including mathematics and English. This has gone from being well above average to being broadly in line with the average. Current assessments for Year 11 indicate students are on course to do better, with the school using a number of effective intervention strategies to target students at the grade C/D borderline. Weaker subjects in 2007 such as religious education and physical education (PE) also indicate an upward trend. Students have also already achieved a number of science modules which show more students will achieve a grade A* to C at GCSE.

Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those who speak English as an additional language make good progress. As do the small number of students from Pakistani heritages and students who are eligible for free school meals. The school focuses on the achievement of all students through the good care and support it provides.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students' personal development is good. Their enjoyment of school is seen in their good attendance. Students behave well in lessons and around the school and this is a contributory factor in their good progress at school. Students show respect for their teachers and each other in this inclusive school, where relationships are good at all levels. Students say that they feel safe from bullying and are confident that any issues that do arise are swiftly dealt with by their teachers or peer mentors. Students are proud of their school. There is an active student council that has a growing voice and campaigns successfully for improvements to the school environment.

Students' spiritual development is good and reflects the Catholic ethos of the school, which embraces all faiths under its umbrella. Reconciliation services provide a listening ear for all students. Social and moral development is good and students speak enthusiastically of the range of activities they undertake for charity in school. Cultural development is satisfactory and is not consistently developed across the curriculum. Students understand the need for healthy lifestyles and participate in a wide range of extra-curricular sporting activities, enhanced by the extended schools provision. The school has achieved Healthy School status, reflected in a significant improvement in healthy eating options in the canteen. Students' good development of basic and work life skills ensures that they are prepared well for their future lives.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Teachers are using a consistent framework to plan their teaching and as a result students make good progress. Pockets of outstanding practice were seen, for example in geography and history. The good relationships between teachers and students and amongst students, plus the good attitudes and motivation that students have towards their work, make a strong contribution to learning and progress. In lessons there is effective use of peer assessment and learning is consolidated well. Teachers are using skilful questioning to engage students to think in more

depth about their work. This generates a rich dialogue between teachers and students, which promotes good learning. Good examples of this were seen at the end of a mathematics lesson, where the teacher was exploring the spiritual nature of Pythagoras' theorem. Classroom strategies which enable students to learn more independently, become more equal partners in their learning and explore their subjects in greater depth are not yet embedded across the school. Therefore, more able students are not always sufficiently challenged and helped to develop appropriate skills of learning and enquiry which will support their work in the sixth form. Through the school's specialist status there is increased use of ICT in lessons to aid learning.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

As a result of good evaluation the school has established a good curriculum that is continuously being developed and broadened to further meet the needs of all students, thus improving learning and outcomes. It is also evolving to ensure students are prepared for the next steps in their careers. This is being done through expanding the courses on offer, including using partnerships with other schools and colleges, and the creative use of time and resources, for example in music and drama. The reduction of the Key Stage 3 courses to two years in foundation subjects is providing teachers with flexibility to be able to plan effectively to support students to achieve well at age 16. The school's specialist status has begun to enrich the curriculum for all students through access to ICT, an increasingly successful subject area, and a range of related creative technologies. There is an extensive range of enrichment programmes including the annual sixth form induction trip to New York, PE tours and Urdu classes. The reduction of lunchtime to three staggered 30-minute slots has reduced the amount of enrichment the school can offer. Although there are additional opportunities at other times, the take-up for these has not yet met former levels.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Requirements for safeguarding procedures are in place and child protection systems are robust. Students are cared for and nurtured as individuals, and are well supported in both pastoral and academic matters by a range of dedicated staff. This care is at the heart of the school's ethos, where pastoral support is a strength.

Students receive good quality advice and guidance at key transition points in their education that complement the school's good monitoring and tracking procedures. Students are aware of their targets in all subjects but do not consistently understand what they need to do to reach the next level or grade. Marking of written work, whilst encouraging, does not always offer specific guidance on what the student should do to improve.

Vulnerable students, those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those with English as an additional language are well supported and their progress is good. However, the school is aware that targets for students with English as an additional language are not consistently challenging across subjects in all key stages.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The headteacher provides clear direction and is well supported by senior and middle leaders. The impact of the good leadership at all levels is seen in the good GCSE results and students' good personal development. There is effective use of challenging targets for both students and teachers to ensure that students achieve above expectations. Responsibility and accountability are well distributed across the senior team, with provision for a wide range of staff to contribute to school improvement.

The school's self-evaluation is good because it is systematic, analytical and reflective. This takes place at whole school and departmental level and is clearly linked to the school's planning cycle. There is good use of data and the outcomes of evaluation. This enables early intervention to take place when concerns are identified. Regular observations of lessons are undertaken to highlight and share good practice and to judge the quality of teaching and learning. The school is, however, sometimes too generous in grading teaching, and areas for improvement in teaching across the school are not consistently identified.

Governors are very supportive of the school and are committed. They discharge their duties effectively but are not consistently asking challenging questions to secure further improvement. All statutory requirements are met and there are robust procedures for vetting adults who work at the school to safeguard children. The school's budget is well managed and good systems are in place to ensure that it gives good value for money. Funding for specialist status has been well used with a large investment in interactive whiteboards and ICT across departments. This has enabled students to benefit from the latest technology in lessons and there has been a significant improvement in results in ICT.

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

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	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	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
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	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?	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	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2	
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

14 March 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of St Thomas More Catholic College, Longton, ST3 2NJ

I would like to thank you for the welcome you gave to my colleagues and me when we visited your school recently. Thank you for talking with us and giving us your views. We were very impressed by your good behaviour and attendance and your positive attitudes to learning.

You are right to be proud of your school. We have judged the school to be good. You enjoy school, feel safe and make valuable contributions to school life and the local community. The Angels Walk-Way is a very striking feature of the school, and your ideas and designs for its development are very commendable. Sixth form students are very good role models for younger students and take on many responsibilities and leadership roles. The work of the St Vincent de Paul society is particularly impressive. You make good progress by the end of Year 11 and GCSE results have improved significantly since 2002 and are above the national average. The school helps you do this through the good care and support it provides. The staff know you well. A high priority is given to improving the quality of the lessons you receive and teaching is good overall. The school's specialist status in mathematics and computing has provided you with more opportunities and resources.

Leadership and management of the school are good. Senior managers have a clear view of how the school is doing and where they can make improvements. There are some things that the school can do to become better, and we have asked the headteacher and senior managers to:

- improve how well sixth form students do on their academic courses so more meet or exceed their target grades
- ensure lessons encourage you to be more active and independent learners and that more able students get sufficient challenge
- ensure marking consistently provides clear and specific guidance on how you can improve your work.

The managers, teachers, governors and staff are very committed to their work. We encourage you to continue to support the school and play your part in making it even better. I wish you every success in the future.

Yours faithfully

Davinder Dosanjh Her Majesty's Inspector

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Yours faithfully

Davinder Dosanjh
Her Majesty's Inspector