

St Benedict's Catholic School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	124861
Local Authority	SUFFOLK LA
Inspection number	315087
Inspection date	17 January 2008
Reporting inspector	Harmer Parr 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	13–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	414
6th form	146
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs M Smith
Headteacher	Mr P Rossi
Date of previous school inspection	21 February 2005
School address	Beetons Way Bury St Edmunds Suffolk IP32 6RH
Telephone number	01284 753512
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The inspector evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues in detail: achievement from 14 to 16, students' personal development and the curriculum from 14 to 19. Evidence was gathered from observations of lessons and discussions with students, teachers, parents and the Chair of Governors. The responses of 140 parents who returned a questionnaire were analysed. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but the inspector 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

St Benedict's Catholic School is smaller than most secondary schools, with just under a third of its students in the sixth form. It has an explicit Christian ethos that permeates its work. Nine in ten students come from its neighbouring Catholic middle school, with the others drawn from a wide geographical area. One in five students is non-Catholic. St Benedict's is a Specialist School for mathematics and computing. Standards on entry to the school are above average. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals or identified as having learning difficulties is low. Very few students are from minority ethnic groups or need help with learning English. The vast majority of students carry on with their education beyond age 16, six in ten of them in the school's sixth form.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

'I feel that the school combines academic excellence with concern for the welfare of its pupils.'

The parent who said this summed up the views of nine in ten respondents to the questionnaire. The students themselves, in different words, agreed. Their teachers treated them with respect and encouraged them to be responsible, caring and independent. If they were not, the teachers 'would soon be on their case'. The inspection confirmed the accuracy of these views.

The school's success is founded on its Christian ethos. Spiritual, moral and social development is outstanding. The school takes exceptionally good care of individuals, and encourages them to do the same for their peers. As a result, the atmosphere is warm and supportive, giving students the confidence to grow and the space to be independent. Very few abuse this trust. Most attend and behave very well, take responsibility for their progress, and show a high level of concern for the needs of others, in school and in the wider community. They are involved in a large number of projects; for example, where they support the elderly or raise money for charity. The school makes sure they know how to stay safe and, within the constraints of its limited accommodation for physical education (PE), to live healthy lives. It could do more to help them understand and appreciate more fully the multicultural nature of modern Britain.

Security and confidence create an ideal environment for learning. The students know what their current standards are, what targets they have to meet and whether they are on course to do so. They talk about their work in a mature fashion, and confidently express their views in lessons and in discussions. Checks on progress are regular. Mentors, including sixth form students, provide support and encouragement. The students' view of their teachers, corroborated by the inspection, was that most of them knew their subject very well, had an obvious enthusiasm for it and provided an interesting variety of activities. In the main, they got on very well with them. They were also appreciative of the further opportunities for independent learning provided by the school's computer networks, which many departments exploit to the full. Specialist School status has made a big difference. It has provided the resources that have allowed the school to develop new teaching methods and the students to extend their independence.

Close partnership with the middle school, the neighbouring high school, other schools in the area and the college of further education contributes to the high standards the school attains. Almost all students stay in education after age 16. The progress they make between ages 11 and 14 accelerates, not affected in any way by the change of school. The progress made between ages 11 and 16 has placed the school in the top 10% of schools in the country in each of the last three years. The school's inclusiveness is a factor in this: minority groups and pupils with learning difficulties achieve very well thanks to individual and in some cases exceptional support. High success rates at each point of national testing, and high numbers continuing with education beyond ages 16 and 18 indicate that the curriculum is well suited to students' needs. Never satisfied however, the school is working in active partnership with neighbouring schools and the college to extend the vocational opportunities it provides pre-16, which are currently limited.

The inspection checked if progress slowed down in any way between 14 and 16. It found no evidence to suggest that it did: the very high standards attained in national tests at age 14 continue at GCSE. In 2007, three quarters of students gained five or more GCSE grades A*-C including English and mathematics, compared with fewer than half nationally. More than four in five students attained grade C or above in the major-entry subjects of English, mathematics,

science and religious education, and, in science, two in five achieved grade A or A*. The one exception to these very high standards, ironically, was in one of the school's specialisms, information and communication technology, where it failed to meet its specialist school targets through a combination of staffing difficulties and inexperience of the requirements of the course. It is taking active and well-considered steps to rectify this problem for current students.

The school has developed very much in the image of its headteacher. Leadership is firm, caring and built on respect. The approach is measured and sensible, drawing on the expertise and strengths of well-established staff and avoiding the imposition of unnecessary systems: the ones it has are relatively light-touch and do the job very well. Self-evaluation is accurate. Priorities resulting from it are well chosen and few in number. The improvement plan sets a very clear direction. Subject leaders work within a well-established framework, adapting requirements to their own needs, as, for example, in the development of web pages for the school's intranet. Teachers are encouraged to set very challenging targets for the students. They accept that they may miss them, but will significantly raise achievement in the attempt. This has proved a most successful strategy, built on a self-confidence that transmits itself to the students. The governors have provided good support to this highly effective school, without challenging it to be even better. Nevertheless, the school has clearly moved on from the already high standards reported at the last inspection, and has excellent potential to improve further.

A few parents who responded to the questionnaire felt that the school could improve the ways in which it takes account of the views of students and parents. The inspection found evidence to support this view. The School Council plays an active part in school life, but students felt that it was not always effective in communicating its activities and decisions. Given their responsible attitudes, the students' role in contributing to evaluation and decision-making is currently underdeveloped. The school's communication with parents is generally good, but not consistently so, and it has not fully exploited the potential of its website to reach out to its parent constituency and its community.

These minor weaknesses do not detract from this highly successfully school, where, to quote another parent, 'children are assisted where necessary and stretched where possible'.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

This is a highly effective sixth form. Students make a significant contribution to the school and the wider community; for example, all participate in community service and half act as mentors to younger students. Most students study for A and AS levels and a small number for Applied GCES. The school offers a wide range of subjects through its partnerships with the college and the neighbouring upper school. There is nevertheless an intention to review what is offered, in particular to develop vocational courses and to help the school meet its challenging targets as a Specialist School for attainment and participation.

Standards are high, and have risen further over the last three years. The school commissioned a report from the independent A Level Performance System (ALPS), which showed that the progress students made placed it in the top 10% of schools nationally in 2007. Almost two-thirds of students gained a pass at grades A or B, significantly above national figures. The pass rate at grades A to E for AS level was also above average. Numbers at Advance GCE are too small to permit valid comparison. Almost all students who begin a course in the sixth form complete it successfully, and almost all carry on with their education.

What the school should do to improve further

To raise standards still further, the school should:

- develop further the participation of students in evaluation and decision-making;
- involve parents more by improving the quality and consistency of communication with them.

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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	1
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	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1	1
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1	1
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	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	1	
The behaviour of learners	1	
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	1	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	1	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	1
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	1
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	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 January 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of St Benedict's Catholic School, Bury St Edmunds, IP32 6RH

As you know, I recently inspected your school. Thank you for making me so welcome, and a special thank you to those of you I interviewed or who spoke to me. You will see that I have included some of your views in the main report.

You go to a really good school. It is a caring school that looks after you very well. Because of this you make extremely good progress and you achieve very high standards. Did you know, for example, that in some areas your school is in the top 10% of schools in the country? The school helps you to achieve very well, but it also makes you care for each other and care for others outside the school. You raise a lot of money for charity and are very aware of your responsibilities as 'effective Christians in the modern world'. You take full advantage of the excellent facilities for computing, and you appreciate your teachers' efforts to work around the lack of proper space for PE. Most of you are rarely absent and most of you behave very well. You told me that your teachers respect you, usually know their subjects well, teach them enthusiastically, keep a careful eye on you and always encourage you. Is it surprising you do so well?

Both you and your parents suggested ways that the school could be even better. You thought you could contribute more to the way the school is run and be consulted a little better. The school could do more to inform you about how it acted on your views, or explain why it decided not to. It could also improve the way it communicates with your parents, for example by extending the use of its website. I agree with these suggestions. Education is a partnership between you, your parents and the school, and you probably have many good ideas about how that partnership could be even better. Please do put your ideas forward, because the school will value your contribution.

Thank you for a most enjoyable visit, and good luck for the future.

Yours sincerely

Harmer Parr Her Majesty's Inspector