

St Thomas's Centre

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	132128
Local Authority	Blackburn with Darwen
Inspection number	315927
Inspection dates	28–29 January 2008
Reporting inspector	John Atkinson

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

Type of school	Pupil referral unit
School category	Pupil referral unit
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	120
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Jon Stonehouse
Headteacher	Mrs Margaret Nowell
Date of previous school inspection	1 September 2003
School address	Lambeth Street Blackburn Lancashire BB1 1NA
Telephone number	01254 680523
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Age group	11-16
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by an Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

This pupil referral unit (PRU) is on two sites with the majority of pupils receiving their education at the St Thomas's Centre. A smaller number of pupils receive their education at hospital and a group of older pupils attend a local further education college. The PRU caters for pupils who are unable to attend school because of short-term medical needs, identified mental health needs, exclusion from mainstream schools or who are pregnant teenagers or teenage mothers. Nine pupils have a statement of special educational need. There are 15 looked after children. The majority of pupils are of White British heritage and a minority are of Asian or British Asian heritage. The number of pupils on roll fluctuates throughout the year and on a daily basis, because the centre admits pupils who are on fixed term exclusions for up to 25 days from mainstream schools.

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's is a good centre with many strengths and where pupils with a wide range of needs are well catered for. It has a good, and well deserved, reputation in the local authority for its flexible, fast and positive response to vulnerable, disaffected and challenging pupils. It is a good example of how different agencies work collaboratively with a shared commitment to enabling pupils to overcome their difficulties and engage in the available academic and vocational courses. Pupils' enjoyment of, and participation in, the opportunities available to them contrast sharply with their previous negative responses and poor attendance. Parents and carers readily acknowledge the impact of the centre on improving youngsters' behaviour, attitudes and achievements. As one parent commented, 'Our son is more confident, more relaxed, less aggressive and less argumentative.'

Teaching is good. Although standards overall remain low, pupils enjoy their learning and apply themselves conscientiously. Older pupils make particularly good progress because of their mature attitudes, sensible behaviour and desire to do well. This is a direct outcome of the staff's high expectations, intensive support and positive encouragement. This leads to pupils gaining passes in a number of GCSE and other accredited courses as well as acquiring vocational experiences and qualifications that prepare them well for their futures. Pupils' progress is tracked carefully and regularly but the data are not used to set clear learning targets. Consequently, pupils are not sure about what they need to do to reach the next level in their learning. Teachers and support staff work very effectively in teams, creating a calm and purposeful learning ethos where pupils' emotional and behavioural difficulties are effectively challenged and changed. This results in Key Stage 3 pupils making good progress in English, mathematics and science and developing more appropriate behaviour and attitudes to learning. Teachers mark pupils' work in a positive way and encourage pupils to work harder but do not indicate to them what they need to do to improve their work.

Pupils' personal development and well-being are good because of the good care and guidance and outstanding levels of support they receive. Links with other agencies are very strong. The excellent relationships between adults and young people underpin the centre's ethos and lead to pupils feeling safe, secure and at ease in sharing anxieties and problems. As a result, pupils become positively involved in the centre's activities and develop the confidence and self-belief to participate in opportunities that they would have previously avoided because of lack of confidence or fear of failure. Attendance is satisfactory for the majority of pupils, which compares favourably with the poor attendance of most pupils in their previous schools. The centre provides an outstanding diet for pupils and complements this with good cookery lessons, resulting in pupils making informed and sensible choices about healthy lifestyles, particularly during the school day.

The curriculum is good with an appropriate balance between academic and vocational courses. There is a wide range of additional opportunities, particularly in the arts and sport, which broaden pupils' horizons and increase their engagement with learning. The outcome is that pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good and reflected in their high level of tolerance and respect for difference and each other's personal circumstances. The vocational curriculum is key in motivating pupils and preparing them well for the available options when leaving school; it also leads to a high proportion of pupils being placed in employment, education or training.

The good leadership of the headteacher and deputy headteacher is key to sustaining a hugely positive ethos throughout all aspects of the centre. The management committee are effective in supporting and challenging the headteacher in the promotion of a high quality personalised education. This strong leadership, positive ethos and high morale of staff combine to ensure that the centre has a good capacity to improve and gives good value for money.

What the school should do to improve further

- Use assessment information to inform pupils of their learning targets in all subjects.
- Ensure marking gives clear guidance to pupils about what they need to do to improve their work and reach the next step in their learning.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Attainment on entry is below average because most pupils have had illnesses, traumatic life experiences and/or disrupted schooling that have resulted in considerable periods out of school. Standards are low but boys and girls on all sites make good progress and, taking account of prior attainment, achieve well; looked after children achieve equally well. Pupils in Years 10 and 11 achieve well in GCSEs in a good number of subjects and in a wide range of other accredited courses, including adult literacy and numeracy. Pupils' artwork throughout the centre is high in quality and the standards achieved at GCSE in art and physical education (PE) exceeds previous expectations by a long way. Pupils achieve particularly well in vocational courses in joinery, bricklaying and painting and decorating. They acquire good cookery skills and some pupils achieve well in GCSE food and nutrition, and child development. Successes in preparation for work courses and in work experience show the enormous progress that pupils make in learning new skills that give them access to a variety of options when they reach school leaving age. In Key Stage 3, pupils make good progress in English, mathematics, science, and information and communication technology (ICT) skills which are used well in other subjects such as art and history.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Pupils' personal development, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, is good. Pupils enjoy what the centre offers, regain their enthusiasm for learning, grow in self-esteem and acquire a stronger belief in their abilities. As a result, they become more socially adept, less anxious and develop excellent personal relationships with staff and pupils alike. This leads to them having higher expectations for themselves and increases their ambitions for the future. The staff's consistent implementation of routines and setting of very clear boundaries bring about huge improvements in pupils' attitudes and understanding of the consequences of their behaviour. The centre has effective procedures for improving attendance, resulting in the vastly improved attendance rates for most pupils. A minority of pupils remain poor attenders but good links with external agencies ensure these individuals are supported. Pupils feel very safe at school and are confident that they can share any worries or anxieties with staff. Pupils eat very healthily at school, learn how to cook for themselves and regularly take part in a wide range of physical activities. The personal, health and social education (PSHE) programme actively develops pupils' understanding of healthy lifestyles, the misuse of drugs and how they can become more involved in community activities. The outcome is that pupils are well informed

about the choices they can make and how to express their opinions and views in a constructive manner.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

The quality of teaching and learning is good. Teachers and support staff have excellent relationships with pupils and use a wide variety of approaches to engage and motivate them. As a result, pupils enjoy lessons, work hard and are keen to do well. Lessons are well planned and structured, with high expectations of behaviour and standards of work. Every classroom is well organised with immaculate and stimulating displays. This results in a very positive ethos that fosters an enthusiastic approach to learning and pride in the presentation of work. Praise and rewards are used appropriately to recognise effort, progress and achievements. A significant strength is the staff's ability to engage pupils and improve their speaking, listening and social skills. The pace in lessons is brisk and tasks are well matched to pupils' abilities, resulting in pupils growing in confidence of their ability to succeed. There is a group of challenging younger and immature pupils who require firmer handling in some lessons. When teachers mark pupils' work they are very encouraging, but do not give sufficient guidance as to how it could be improved. This means that there are missed opportunities to further raise standards.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum and its enrichment are good. There is a wide range of relevant courses in Key Stages 3 and 4 with a wealth of opportunities for pupils to participate in. The access to accredited courses in Key Stage 4 gives pupils the opportunities to achieve qualifications that many had lost hope of achieving. The many 'additional' activities, particularly in the arts and PE, are influential in motivating pupils and widening their horizons with the effect that pupils develop a renewed enjoyment of learning and an appreciation of different cultures. The good vocational and particularly work related courses, though not available to all pupils, give them a real sense of purpose and enable them to recognise how they can maximise their opportunities for further training, education and employment.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

This is a safe and caring centre whose ethos is underpinned by outstanding relationships and where pupils feel valued and respected. Parents feel their children are achieving much better than in their previous schools. Arrangements to safeguard pupils are very thorough and this means that the most vulnerable or at risk pupils, including those looked after, are quickly identified and supported. Child protection arrangements and those to ensure everyone's health, welfare and safety are in place. The guidance that pupils receive about how to improve their behaviour and attitudes is very good. Guidance on how to improve their academic standards could be more robust. The school's collaborative and innovative work with other agencies provides positive solutions and outcomes for individuals' complex needs. The on-site nursery and links with teenage pregnancy professionals play a very effective role in enabling teenage mothers and mothers-to-be to continue their studies and achieve well.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The headteacher leads the school with drive, energy and enthusiasm. Her clear vision is fully shared by staff and pupils. As a result, there is a very positive ethos where pupils can see a brighter future for themselves and where staff and pupils believe in the school's motto that 'Every day is a new day'. Consequently, pupils engage positively in learning, make good progress and become more socially skilled and personally responsible. The senior leadership team have an accurate view of the centre's strengths and areas for development and provide very good support to individual staff to develop the skills necessary to meet the diverse needs of the pupils. The management committee is involved well in the strategic direction and monitoring of the centre. The morale of the staff is very high and professional development opportunities are excellent.

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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
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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
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	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?	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	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?	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	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
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
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
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

30 January 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of St Thomas's Centre, Blackburn with Darwen, BB1 1NA

I really enjoyed the two days that I recently spent in the centre and want to thank you for making me welcome, sharing your opinions about how the centre has helped you and showing me your work. I was very impressed by the enthusiasm you had for learning and the ambitions you had for yourselves. Many of you told me how you had improved your behaviour and attitudes, and the ways in which you show respect for each other, the staff and the school environment are a credit to you.

I agree with your view that yours is a good centre which has helped you to get back on track and achieve success in exams and vocational courses. You have really good opportunities to gain experience of different work skills and your commitment to doing well was obvious. The centre has many strengths:

- staff treat you as individuals and help you to improve your learning, attendance and behaviour.
- staff and pupils get on well and treat each other with respect.
- staff have high expectations of you and you want to succeed in exams.
- the headteacher is totally committed to getting the very best for you.

I think that you can help yourselves and the centre by continuing with your very positive attitudes and hard work. It is really important that you make the most out of the opportunities the centre provides for you so you can achieve well in your exams and go on to do well in the future. I have asked the staff to improve the centre by:

- setting you clearer targets in your learning
- giving you clear advice on how you can reach your targets.

I hope you carry on working hard all year and continue to be as helpful to each other as you were when I was in the centre.

Yours sincerely

John Atkinson

Lead inspector