

St Mary's College, Blackburn

Inspection report

Provider reference	130746
Published date	June 2008

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Background information

Inspection judgements

Grading

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

The descriptors for the four grades are:

- *grade 1 – outstanding*
- *grade 2 – good*
- *grade 3 – satisfactory*
- *grade 4 – inadequate*

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of this inspection, inspectors took account of: the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans; comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body; and where appropriate the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk); reports from the inspectorate annual assessment visits or quality monitoring inspection; and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the last inspection. This inspection focused on the following aspects:

- overall effectiveness of the organisation and its capacity to improve further
- achievement and standards
- quality of provision
- leadership and management.

Description of the provider

1. St Mary's College, founded by the Marist Fathers in 1925, is a Roman Catholic sixth form college serving the needs of the East Lancashire Catholic community. The mission statement is based on true Christian values proclaimed in the gospel and seeks 'to provide a challenging, high quality, post-16 education whereby students can grow as balanced human beings, morally, intellectually and spiritually'. The majority of students are recruited from seven Catholic and one Church of England secondary schools. However, the college attracts increasing numbers of students from all faiths and, in particular, those of Muslim faith.
2. The college is situated near to Bastwell Ward, which, according to the Indices of Deprivation, 2,000 is ranked as the 189th most deprived ward out of England's 8,414 wards. Census data indicate that unemployment is significantly higher than the national average among the Asian population in Bastwell and other nearby wards. Approximately 28% of all students at the college are from minority ethnic backgrounds, which is higher than the proportion in the local community.
3. The college offers courses in 11 of the 15 sector subject areas. In the academic year beginning in 2006, there were 1,375 full-time learners aged 16-18, the majority of whom were studying on advanced level courses. Approximately 296 adults were studying at the college, including 16 degree students, and a further 312 learners on Skills for Life courses in the community.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Good: Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Good: Grade 2
Achievement and standards	Good: Grade 2
Quality of provision	Good: Grade 2
Leadership and management	Good: Grade 2
<i>Equality of opportunity</i>	<i>Outstanding: Contributory Grade 1</i>

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Good: Grade 2

4. This is a good college with some outstanding features. The college has a strong Catholic ethos which is rooted in the values of the Marist community. These values promote the significance of each individual and the importance of service to others. The principal is unequivocal in his commitment to these values and reviews strategies and processes to ensure that these principles are embedded in the work of the college. Governors demonstrate a firm commitment to the college ethos and support its development. Learners are encouraged to recognise and respect the different views and beliefs of others and examine their individual faith and values with confidence. The Marist principles are presented to and explored thoroughly with all staff and students at induction. Specific training and development for staff helps them to support the ethos of the college.
5. Achievement and standards are good. In 2007, success rates on advanced courses improved to around the high national average. Learners enjoy attending college and generally achieve well. Students are set challenging targets and many attain high pass rates. However, the college is aware of the need to improve consistency of results and the progress students make in all subjects. Actions are in place to address this issue. Progression rates to higher education (HE) are excellent. Teaching and learning are good and much is outstanding. Nevertheless, there remains some satisfactory teaching which the college is tackling.
6. The college's response to social and education inclusion is outstanding. It is highly responsive to the local community and encourages participation by harder to reach adults through its extensive Skills for Life programme; a clear demonstration of the ethos of the college at work. Just over a quarter of current students aged 16-18 are from minority ethnic groups, which is well above the proportion in the local community. The participation and performance by different groups of students is monitored thoroughly and variations in success rates are used to set targets and actions for improvement. A very high proportion of Asian heritage students' progress to HE. Care, guidance and support services are outstanding.
7. Leadership and management are good. Governors and senior leaders set a clear strategic direction. Self-assessment is broadly accurate and quality systems are embedded. Curriculum management has been strengthened but the college knows that more work needs to be done at subject leader level to improve consistency in achievement and standards across the college. The college is outstanding in its promotion of equal opportunities, has good capacity to improve and provides good value for money.

Capacity to improve

Good: Grade 2

8. Inspectors agree with the college that its capacity to improve is good. Its record is good, as shown by the recent increase in success rates for learners on level 3 courses. The very high quality care and support for students, evident in the last inspection, has been maintained. The college's responsiveness to the needs of learners and the local community is outstanding.
9. The self-assessment process is robust, comprehensive and makes effective use of data. The report provides a broadly accurate assessment of strengths and areas for improvement. There is a clear focus on raising aspirations, improving the quality of provision for learners, and identifying and tackling areas for improvement. Most of the actions for improvement are clearly focused. Quality improvement measures have resulted in rising success and retention rates at most levels. Performance is monitored thoroughly.

The effectiveness of the steps taken by the college to promote improvement since the last inspection

10. Good progress has been made in tackling the key issues raised in the last inspection, although the college would acknowledge that the rate of progress has been much quicker in the last year than previously. A significant proportion of teaching is now good or better. An extensive building programme has resulted in vastly improved accommodation in science and English and in many other areas of the college. Accessibility issues have been resolved.
11. There is much greater involvement of students within the chaplaincy team and in the planning of assemblies and liturgies. Students make good progress overall. Some, especially in English and performing arts subjects, do better than this. However, the college knows that it still needs to improve the progress students make in a small but significant number of subjects. Actions are in place to remedy this.

Key strengths

- strong commitment to the mission and Marist ethos
- high success rates in many subjects
- outstanding social and educational inclusion
- much good and better teaching and learning
- outstanding equality of opportunity
- good leadership and management
- outstanding support for students.

Areas for improvement

The college should address:

- inconsistency in success rates and value added across the college
- subject leadership in a few areas.

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Good: Grade 2

12. Achievement and standards are good and this agrees with the college's self-assessment report. The majority of the college's students follow long level 3 courses including GCE AS, A level and applied GCE A level. College data for 2007 indicate that success rates for GCE AS and A level have improved and are around the high national average for these courses. Success rates for students on applied GCE A level courses are high.
13. In 2007, success rates on level 1 courses for learners aged 16-18 declined, although they remain above the sector average. The level 1 success rate for adults improved significantly and is high. There was a slight improvement in success rates at level 2 for learners aged 16-18, although they remain around average. The proportion of students who achieved a good A* to C grade in GCSE English is significantly higher than the national average. Nearly all students leave college with a qualification at level 1 or 2 in information technology (IT). The good results in English and IT contribute well to learners' future economic well-being.
14. Value added data show that many learners achieve grades at GCE A level that are higher than predicted from their GCSE grades. Performance in a few areas including English, medieval history, performing arts and vocational subjects, the grades are consistently outstanding. In a small but significant number of subjects, students tend to achieve lower grades than would be expected.
15. Behaviour and attendance in lessons are exemplary.

Quality of provision

Good: Grade 2

16. There is much good teaching and learning. The college has made significant investment in training to improve teachers' skills, especially in planning lessons that meet the needs of students with different abilities, and in the use of information learning technology (ILT). Learners are enthusiastic, have positive relationships with their teachers and enjoy their work. In the best lessons, teachers use a range of strategies to help students to make good progress, including opportunities for them to learn from their peers. ILT is used very effectively in class. Teachers make good use of the college's virtual learning environment (VLE) to store course and assignment details, and to monitor students' progress. Students enjoy using the VLE and particularly like the interactive quizzes to test their understanding of a range of topics.
17. Systems for observing teaching have been refined and strengthened. Observation records focus well on learning and the learner experience. In a few cases, records show that observers underestimate the significance of areas for improvement when attributing overall grades for lessons. The college is tackling the need to raise the quality of some teaching in a number of subjects where achievement and standards are not improving quickly enough.

18. The recording and monitoring of students' progress is thorough. The college's VLE hosts an electronic 'markbook' system. This is used well by all teachers to monitor students' attendance, check their progress towards targets and to record marks for and completion of individual assignments.
19. The response to social and educational inclusion is outstanding and this agrees with the self-assessment report. A broad range of GCE AS and A levels and GCE applied A levels are offered that are well matched to the needs of all students. Programmes at level 2 have expanded into areas such as early years. Progression to university for learners aged 16-18 is excellent. The proportion of learners who progress from level 2 to level 3 courses within the college is good. Provision for adult learners, particularly those from Asian heritage groups, is highly regarded in the community; many progress to higher level courses at other colleges. Higher education courses at the college are extremely popular and very successful, especially for Asian women. The local community is well served by one nursery on the college site and another, run by the college, in a local children's centre. Learning resources are of a high standard throughout the college.
20. The college works well with local employers to provide effective work experience opportunities for learners on vocational programmes. On other courses, opportunities for curriculum enrichment are extensive and include trips and visits, often to other countries. There is a broad range of enrichment activities although participation in these is patchy. Good access to sports facilities helps students to keep healthy. The Chaplaincy organises imaginative events such as a college walk at the beginning of the year, to promote charitable work and demonstrate the ethos of the college to new learners and the wider community. Through these activities, students make an excellent contribution to their community.
21. All students pursue a nationally approved course in religious education. The 'Values' course is well resourced and sensitive to the needs of Catholic learners as well as learners from other faiths, or none. The programme promotes spiritual and philosophical reflection but also examines cross-cultural topics to promote dialogue between differing faiths and cultures. Those who deliver the programme have received considerable training and development for this important role. However, there is insufficient challenge for some learners in sections of this programme. All curriculum areas embrace religious and spiritual education in a thematic way. In physics, for example, the 'Big Bang' concept is explored from the positions of both science and religion.
22. The college's provision of guidance and support is outstanding. Initial advice and guidance are comprehensive and there is considerable flexibility in matching courses to learners' needs. Potential learners receive detailed information and college personnel attend school events for pupils from Year 9 onwards to offer impartial advice. Induction programmes and taster sessions are imaginative and enjoyed by learners. The tutorial programme has been radically restructured to meet learners' needs and students now receive considerable personalised support. The new programme integrates personal, social, moral and spiritual education effectively, but is not yet subject to quality

monitoring. Individual monitoring meetings with learners take place frequently with speedy intervention to tackle underperformance. Attendance at tutorial sessions is exemplary. Identification of and provision of additional learning support are excellent. Well established arrangements are in place to meet students' additional and specific learning needs, including dyslexia. Learners with disabilities or complex learning needs achieve well. More than half of all learners benefit from sustained additional learning support. Counselling and mental health services are accessible and external support agencies are exploited effectively. The degree of flexibility and responsiveness in addressing learners' needs is outstanding. Careers information, including extensive personal guidance, is readily available and highly valued. All learners receive thorough preparation for progression to higher education, particularly first generation applicants. Careers education for those wishing to enter employment is less structured.

Leadership and management

Good: Grade 2

Contributory grades:

Equality of opportunity

Outstanding: Grade 1

23. Leadership and management are good and this agrees with the college's own judgement. The ethos of the college, which is underpinned by the Marist values of inclusion, places students at the very centre of all college activity. Since his appointment in 2005, the principal has made several improvements and is very clear about the need to raise achievement and standards in all areas. He has strengthened curriculum management, overseen a significant building project and maintained many of the strengths from the last inspection. Governance is good. Governors know the strengths of the college well and are clear about the next priorities. Financial management is strong. Improvements to the college estate are substantial. The new facilities for performing arts and science are excellent. The college complies fully with the requirements of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2002 (SENDA). Value for money is good.
24. Curriculum management is effective. Faculty heads have a clear appreciation of the strengths in their areas and where improvements are needed. They play an increasingly effective role in monitoring and improving performance of their own areas and are aware of the need to improve subject leadership in a few areas of the curriculum. They are addressing this as a matter of urgency.
25. The quality assurance framework covers most aspects of the college's work and is well embedded. Robust procedures for monitoring students' progress are in place. Weaknesses identified at the last inspection have been addressed, although the college recognises that the rate at which this has happened has been slow until recently. The self-assessment process has been strengthened. It is understood by all staff and has led to improvements in success rates at most levels in 2007. The self-assessment report is largely accurate, but a few of the strengths in the report are not significant strengths or are overstated; for example, value added is judged to be outstanding but detailed analysis identifies wide variability in students' progress across subjects.

26. The college's contribution to the promotion and celebration of equality and diversity is outstanding. The college's commitment to the Marist ethos informs all of its educational, social and caring activities. Prayer and reflection are supported in many ways in the college and learners of all faiths are accommodated with space for prayer. An organised prayer and reflection meeting each morning and a weekly liturgy are open to all learners and staff, although the timing of the weekly liturgy may restrict attendance for some. Learners play an active part in organising major liturgical events, for example the leavers' mass, and these are very well attended by students of all faiths. The college is committed to community cohesion and takes active steps to promote this; for example, the Chaplaincy spearheads open forum events for staff, clergy, governors, learners and other interested parties to establish new ways of promoting dialogue and understanding between individuals from different backgrounds.
27. The college meets current legislative requirements for race equality. Arrangements to safeguard learners and to ensure child protection are robust.

Learners' achievement

Table 1

Success rates on mainstream level 1 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2005 to 2007, compared with the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
1 Long	04/05	223	59	64	-5	195	40	56	-16
	05/06	192	80	71	9	249	35	56	-21
	06/07*	177	77	N/A		254	80	N/A	
GNVQs and precursors	04/05	6	83	71	12	....	....	....	....
	05/06	6	76	79	-3	....	....	....	....
	06/07*	9	100			....	....	....	....
Other	04/05	217	58	63	-5	195	40	56	-16
	05/06	186	80	71	9	249	35	56	-21
	06/07*	168	77	N/A		....	....	N/A	

* college data

Table 2

Success rates on mainstream level 2 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2005 to 2007, compared with the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
2 Long	04/05	414	71	73	-2	13	23	56	-33
	05/06	410	74	78	-4	38	55	64	-9
	06/07*	378	75	N/A		26	65	N/A	
GCSEs	04/05	267	85	78	7	2	100	65	35
	05/06	246	84	82	2	3	100	66	34
	06/07*	267	82	N/A		4	100	N/A	
GNVQs and precursors	04/05	43	81	74	7	....	....	....	....
	05/06	52	85	77	8	....	....	....	....
	06/07*	61	84	N/A		....	....	....	....
Other	04/05	104	30	62	-32	11	9	52	-43
	05/06	112	59	70	-11	34	50	61	-11
	06/07*	50	96	N/A		22	59	N/A	

* college data

Table 3

Success rates on mainstream level 3 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2005 to 2007, compared with the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
3 Long	04/05	3,547	82	82	0	10	100	59	41
	05/06	4,012	82	83	-1	6	100	65	35
	06/07*	4,009	87	N/A		8	100	N/A	
A/A2 levels	04/05	1,100	93	92	1	6	100	76	24
	05/06	1,359	91	93	-2	3	100	78	22
	06/07*	1,338	94	N/A		4	100	N/A	
AS Levels	04/05	2,238	78	78	0	2	100	54	46
	05/06	2,385	76	79	-3	....	....	....	....
	06/07*	2,350	80	N/A		2	100	N/A	
GNVQs and precursors	04/05	165	78	74	4	2	100	....	....
	05/06	189	88	74	14	3	100	....	....
	06/07*	202	87	N/A		2	100	N/A	
Other	04/05	44	70	72	-2	....	....	....	....
	05/06	79	72	75	-3	....	....	....	....
	06/07*	119	87	N/A		....	....	....	....

* college data