

St Gabriel's RC High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	105367
Local Authority	Bury
Inspection number	324213
Inspection dates	1–2 October 2008
Reporting inspector	Jane Austin HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1018
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr John Costello
Headteacher	Mr E Robinson
Date of previous school inspection	20 September 2005
School address	Bridge Road Bury Lancashire BL9 0TZ
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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 Gabriel's is an average sized secondary school serving the Catholic community in Bury. The majority of pupils are White British; although relatively few in number, pupils of Polish heritage form the largest minority ethnic group. Sixty three pupils are at the early stages of learning English. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is well below average. The percentage with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is a little below average: a much lower than average number have statements of special educational need. The school's specialism is science: it has recently developed a horticulture, environment, nature and enterprise centre. It holds awards for excellence in careers guidance, as a healthy school and, at bronze level, as an eco-school.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

St Gabriel's is a good school with some outstanding features. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding, as is the care provided for them. Pupils' behaviour and their attitudes to learning are exemplary. Pupils enjoy school life and make an outstanding contribution to their community, for instance, as school councillors, eco-warriors, peer mentors and science ambassadors. Pupils are able to make a difference because staff value and take their views into account. Pupils are proud of the significant role they played in increasing the choice of healthy foods and gaining the healthy schools award. Their attendance is well above the national average.

Pupils achieve well to reach standards that are well above average by the time they leave school. Provisional results for 2008 indicate that there has been an increase on the 71% who gained at least five GCSE passes at grades A*-C in 2007. The sharp increase in 2007 in the proportion of pupils gaining at least five good GCSE passes including English and mathematics has been maintained. Progress across subjects and key stages has been uneven, but effective use of the tracking system is enabling the school to identify where and when pupils' learning is slowing. A range of support has helped pupils catch up and achieve their challenging targets. However, the use of information about pupils' progress by both curriculum and pastoral leaders in setting targets to guide and support pupils to achieve as well as possible is inconsistent: the school recognises this.

Pupils make good progress because, overall, teaching is good. The best lessons move at a fast pace, keep pupils engaged through a range of exciting activities and build learning in carefully planned steps. Pupils rise to teachers' high expectations, relishing the challenge of demanding tasks. Where lessons are comparatively less successful, there are too few opportunities for pupils to participate in learning and planning does not always take full account of the needs and abilities of all pupils.

The curriculum is good. The school has broadened the choices for pupils at Key Stage 4 so that these cater for the needs and aspirations of pupils of all abilities. An imaginative cross-curricular themed programme for Year 7 has been developed. Considerable enrichment across the curriculum has been made possible through the school's specialist resources. Much of this is linked to themes in science, enterprise and the environment broadening pupils' engagement with these areas and contributing well to their personal development. Pupils appreciate the very wide range of opportunities they have for extra-curricular activities; participation rates are high.

Leadership and management are good. The successful introduction of systems for the regular assessment and tracking of pupils' progress, alongside the monitoring of provision by middle managers, are key developments since the previous inspection. Together, these are providing leaders with much better information about pupils' achievement and the quality of the school's work. However, links between pastoral support and academic monitoring are not systematic enough and monitoring lacks sufficient consistency to inform the school's self-evaluation fully. Nonetheless, rising standards, improvements since the last inspection and the wide-ranging benefits of the school's specialist work demonstrate that the school has good capacity to improve. It provides good value for money.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that full use is made of information about pupils' progress by both curriculum and pastoral leaders to guide and support pupils so that they achieve as well as possible.
- Improve the coherence of the school's quality assurance systems and the consistency with which they are implemented.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

The standards reached by pupils by the time they join the school in Year 7 are above average. When pupils leave at the end of Year 11 standards are significantly above average. In 2007, the proportion of pupils gaining five or more good GCSE grades was well above the national average. The proportion gaining five or more good grades including both English and mathematics was even further above average. Provisional results for 2008 show that standards are at a similarly high level.

This represents good achievement overall, although it is not equally good throughout the school or across all subjects. For example, achievement dipped in mathematics in Key Stage 3 in the three years up to 2007, due to staffing difficulties which have now been resolved. The provisional Key Stage 3 results for mathematics in 2008 show that almost 70% of pupils have moved up by at least two National Curriculum levels between leaving primary school and the end of Year 9. This is a creditable achievement and much higher than for schools nationally.

Underperformance amongst a small group of girls in Key Stage 4 in the last academic year was tackled successfully through well-considered measures to enhance their self-esteem and raise their aspirations. The school's increasingly effective system for tracking pupils' performance enables the progress of both individual and groups of pupils to be monitored, allowing such underachievement to be detected earlier. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those learning English as an additional language, are making as much progress as their peers due to the good support they receive and because they are often taught in small groups.

The school has an increasingly good record of meeting its specialist college targets, particularly over the last two years.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Pupils' personal development and well-being are outstanding. Pupils enjoy school, respond well to challenge and are very keen to learn. This is reflected in their outstanding attendance and behaviour and the enthusiastic way in which they talk about extra-curricular clubs and activities, particularly sports and music. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Pupils are courteous, helpful, welcoming and considerate of others. They say that the school values them and their opinions. The proactive school council speaks with pride of the things it has achieved, such as influencing the healthy and eco schools agenda and awards. Pupils have a clear awareness of environmental issues and understand that they can all play some part in addressing them. Pupils of all ages are actively engaged in contributing to the community, for example, by acting as 'ambassadors' for visitors and through extensive, highly successful charitable fund-raising activities, some of which are instigated by the pupils. They develop an increasingly strong sense of responsibility, so that as they mature older pupils thrive on the opportunity to act as trained peer mentors to support the younger pupils. Pupils

say that they feel safe around the school; that they know how to respond when problems arise and that they are confident that any concerns will be dealt with quickly and effectively. Pupils are excited by, and respond very well to, all opportunities for work-related learning, which combined with good attainment and well developed social and collaborative skills, ensure that they are well prepared for future life.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

The overall quality of teaching and learning is good. Most lessons observed during the inspection were good or better in both key stages. Very good relationships between teachers and pupils, built upon mutual respect, are a hallmark of lessons. In the best lessons, teachers' enthusiasm and good subject knowledge ensure that the pace is brisk, levels of challenge are appropriate and pupils make at least good progress. Careful planning means that activities are well sequenced so that pupils build very effectively on previous learning. Clear learning objectives help pupils understand the purpose of tasks. Well structured opportunities for pupils to work both independently and with others, reinforce learning and foster skills essential for future success. Questions are targeted effectively to check and develop pupils' learning. Sharply focused activities at the end of lessons consolidate learning and promote a sense of achievement.

However, in some lessons expectations are not as high, the pace of learning is more leisurely and only satisfactory progress is made. In these lessons, there is often too much input from teachers so that pupils' attention wanders and they are less motivated. It is not always evident how the range of pupils' needs and abilities are met through activities and inconsistencies in lesson planning do not support best practice in this regard.

As a consequence of the school's specialist status, there has been a significant increase in the facilities for information and communication technology (ICT) across all areas of the school. This has been accompanied by staff training, resulting in good use of ICT as a teaching aid to add variety and interest to lessons.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum is good, meeting the needs of pupils and all statutory requirements. The school's specialism has a significantly positive impact on the curriculum. The school regularly reviews its provision and evaluates new courses effectively. Most recently, a well thought out cross-curricular scheme has been introduced into Year 7. This is designed to enable pupils to focus on and develop their understanding of cultural diversity, global issues, technology, media and creativity. In addition, the introduction of a structured programme will enable pupils to develop and practise their ICT skills in all subject areas.

In Key Stage 4, pupils benefit from the wide and appropriate range of courses offered. Choices have been increased to meet the needs of those seeking more vocational options. The school has introduced an effective alternative curriculum centered on skills essential for working life, for a small group of pupils at risk of not achieving. This has helped these pupils to continue their studies and achieve in line with their abilities.

Linked in many aspects to the school's specialism, work-related learning is a particular strength with all pupils benefiting from a number of imaginative activities, such as the construction of

an eco-garden. The development of an innovative on-site centre for horticulture and enterprise is playing a significant part in fostering business related skills, alongside understanding about care of the environment.

The curriculum is very effectively enriched by a range of events and activity days, such as the eco days in Years 7, 8 and 9. Many of these activities are supported through the school's specialist status. The vast range of extra-curricular opportunities is highly valued by pupils and contributes greatly to their enjoyment of school. There are worthwhile links with organisations abroad, such as an orphanage in Bolivia and the Smiles for Miles appeal. These initiatives extend pupils' awareness of different cultures and offer exciting opportunities for them to acquire new skills.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Care, guidance and support for pupils are good overall. The quality of care is outstanding. Staff know pupils very well and ensure that they are effectively supported at all transition points, so that they can settle quickly into the next stage of school life. There are very good strategies for promoting social and economic well-being, including a careers guidance programme which ensures that the vast majority of pupils gain places in education, employment and training on leaving school. Attendance is outstanding, but the school remains diligent in employing strategies to maintain this and reduce any incidence of unpunctuality. Safeguarding arrangements are robust and include training and clear guidance for all staff. Barriers to learning are removed so that all groups of pupils are able to make equal progress, including the significant number of Eastern European pupils who arrive speaking little English. The school has extensive knowledge of pupils with additional needs and has formed a range of partnerships with outside agencies to support them, but monitoring arrangements are insufficiently developed to ensure that all departments are using information and strategies consistently. Challenging targets are set for pupils in all subjects, but there are some inconsistencies in the way that this is done. Pastoral leaders have a clear commitment to support pupils' academic progress, but their role in doing this is not yet sufficiently developed.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Leadership and management are good. The school has made considerable strides since the last inspection to establish systems that successfully support its central aim of raising standards. The headteacher's collegiate leadership style has enabled all staff to contribute to developments, thus fostering a sense of ownership, professionalism and high morale. The specialist subject department has been at the forefront of the improvements that have been rolled out across the school.

Regular assessment and tracking of pupils' progress towards challenging targets is now in place for every pupil in all subjects. Good use is made of this to identify those who require additional help and encouragement to reach their potential. Suitable support is matched to pupils' needs and reinforced through strong partnerships with parents. Examination results and assessments demonstrate that these measures are effective. However, the school recognises that further benefits for pupils could be gained by building more coherent links between academic monitoring and pastoral support and has plans to develop these.

Alongside tracking pupils' progress, regular monitoring of provision in all subjects has been established, enabling strengths and areas for improvement to be identified. The role of middle leaders has developed so that they play a key part in these processes and are held to account for performance in their subjects. However, some inconsistencies in the frequency and depth of evaluation; a shortfall in training for staff on, for instance, conducting lesson observations and a lack of systematic checks by the senior team reduce the rigour of the school's quality assurance systems. Consequently, while self-evaluation is broadly accurate, it lacks the necessary refinement to drill down beyond accurate overarching priorities.

The school's specialist work has been the catalyst for developing a broad range of mutually beneficial partnerships with schools, colleges, museums and the business sector. A particular success has been work with primary partners, which has not only had a positive impact on pupils' standards and skills in science, but also engaged families in science-related events. This builds well on the already strong links the school has with parents. Many parents who returned the inspection questionnaire commented warmly on the benefits for their children of the ethos of the school as a large family. This sense of community is reflected in the long-standing commitment of many governors and the generous way they give of their time and expertise. Governance is good. The governing body provides an effective level of challenge to the senior leadership team.

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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?	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	2

¹Grade 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.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	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
The extent to which 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	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 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

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	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	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

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

Thank you very much for making us welcome when we inspected your school recently. We were very impressed by your good manners and considerate conduct. Particular thanks go to those of you who gave up time to talk to us. We agree with the very positive picture you gave us of your school. We judge it to be good with some outstanding aspects.

We found the following strengths which led us to draw this conclusion:

- you make good progress to reach standards that are well above average by the time you leave school
- your behaviour is excellent and you have very positive attitudes to learning
- your attendance is outstanding and you enjoy school life, particularly all the trips, visits and activities linked to eco issues
- a very high number of you participate in extra-curricular activities, such as those linked to sports and music
- you approach your responsibilities, for instance, as school councillors and peer mentors in a mature way
- most lessons are interesting, challenging and help you learn at a good pace
- the care provided by staff, who know you very well, is outstanding
- you have a good choice of courses in Key Stage 4.

In order for your school to become even better we have asked the headteacher and staff to keep a closer check on the quality of the school's work and to ensure that information about your progress is used as effectively as possible to raise standards even further.

We wish you all every success in the future.