

St Aidan's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Comprehensive School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	108869
Local Authority	Sunderland
Inspection number	324853
Inspection date	12 June 2008
Reporting inspector	Brian Blake 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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Boys
Number on roll	
School	1190
6th form	270
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Peter Wood
Headteacher	Mr Anthony McCourt
Date of previous school inspection	1 November 2007
School address	Willow Bank Road Ashbrooke Sunderland Tyne and Wear SR2 7HJ
Telephone number	0191 5536073
Fax number	0191 5536077

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one Additional Inspector. The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following aspects of its work:

- the school's compliance with a single central register for Criminal Records Bureau (CRB), police and other identity checks
- achievement and standards
- leadership and management in the sixth form
- the provision for students' personal development and well-being and the quality of care, guidance and support.

Evidence was gathered from the school's self-evaluation form, nationally published student performance data, lesson observations, scrutiny of students' work books and additional documentation provided by the school, and discussions with the headteacher, chair of governors and students. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but the inspectors 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 Aidan's is a boys' specialist language school, which serves a wide area across Sunderland. The school is larger than average in size, with almost all students of White British heritage. A very small number of students from other ethnic groups are at an early stage of learning English. The number of students eligible for free school meals is well below average, as is those identified as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities, or those having a statement of special educational need.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

St Aidan's provides a good and improving standard of education for its students. In the previous inspection, the school was issued with a Notice to Improve because of its failure to compile a single central register for CRB, police and other identity checks. The school now complies fully with all legal requirements for this register and, therefore, in accordance with section 13 (5) of the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that the school no longer requires significant improvement.

The standards achieved by the students are good overall. At Key Stage 3, the students' standards in the three core subjects of English, mathematics and science are above the levels expected. The performance of higher attaining students is above average for both Levels 6+ and 7+ in all three core subjects. At Key Stage 4, results for 2007 improved upon the previous year, and although English and mathematics were just below their respective national averages, both were still broadly in line with the standards expected. These improved outcomes meant that the school increased its percentage of students achieving five or more A* to C grades at GCSE from 2006. By the time the students reach the end of Year 11, their progress is good overall. The students who enter and complete the sixth form provision generally achieve satisfactory standards overall, although results are better in the Vocational Certificate of Education (VCE) than in the more traditional General Certificate of Education (GCE) for A and AS examinations. Overall, the progress for the vast majority of students in the sixth form is satisfactory.

Students' personal development and well-being, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are good in both the main school and sixth form. There are, however, some very positive features within this overall provision. The strong Roman Catholic ethos pervades all aspects of the school and contributes very positively to students' spiritual and moral development. The behaviour of students is good and, as one student said, 'The school deals very quickly with any bullying and bad behaviour.' The expedient actions of the school in response to anti-social behaviour have meant very few recorded incidents or exclusions. The students feel safe because of the easily accessible adult support available throughout the school. A significant number of students participate in extra-curricular activities, many of which provide opportunities to engage in regular physical exercise. The school has yet to achieve 'healthy school status', but it does provide healthy eating options at lunchtimes to develop further students' personal well-being. The overwhelming majority of students who spoke with inspectors praised the school, indicating that they enjoy their work and the many personal successes they achieve in lessons and in out-of-school activities. This positive response is reflected in the above average level of attendance. The students have many opportunities to become involved in school-based decision-making activities, primarily through the range of different student councils. A number of students are involved in the good quality work-related enterprise activities that are linked specifically to the specialist language status of the school.

Because of examinations and the involvement of Year 12 students in a special course, it was possible to observe teaching only in Years 7, 8 and 9. On this limited basis, inspectors are able to confirm the school's view that teaching, overall, is good. In the better lessons, tasks that involved students in active learning ensured enthusiasm and concentration; opportunities for independent learning were appreciated and enjoyed by students. In these lessons there was a clear focus on what had been learned and on the standards achieved by students. Teachers and students are confident in talking about targets. Most feedback was by word of mouth,

however, and little evidence was seen that the school has yet achieved consistency in the frequency and quality of written marking across the curriculum.

The good quality curriculum is broad and balanced and provides well for students' needs. The youngest students are helped to think about how they learn most effectively and enjoy the activities this involves. The best lessons include specific elements that support basic skills, including the development of oracy through paired and group discussion and of competence in a range of information and communication technology (ICT) applications. The school's status as a specialist language college is reflected prominently in the opportunity for most students in Years 7, 8 and 9 to study two modern foreign languages. Enterprise initiatives and a work-related learning programme are further evidence of senior leaders' determination to provide a curriculum that meets the demands of society as well as the interests of students.

The overall quality of the school's provision for the care, guidance and support of the students is good and improving in both the main school and sixth form. By placing a high value on caring and supporting the students, as part of the Roman Catholic ethos of the school, the students are developing a strong sense of belonging to a cohesive community, where their views and opinions are welcomed and encouraged; in response, the students feel well cared for and supported. Those students who spoke with inspectors said that they could always talk with a teacher or another member of staff about any work-related or other issue that may be worrying them. Students who present particularly challenging behaviour are well supported in the school's specialist support unit, the 'Phoenix Centre'. There are, however, occasions when the teachers of those students withdrawn for this specialist support are not sufficiently informed about the length of stay in the centre; this makes curricular entitlement and accurate recording of attendance difficult for these teachers. The overwhelming majority of parents feel that the school is doing all that it can reasonably do to provide their children with a safe and secure learning environment.

Leadership and management are good, both in the main school and in the sixth form. In response to the previous inspection, senior leaders produced a plan with clearly identified priorities; this plan guides improvement and is regularly annotated to reflect actions. As with the school self-evaluation, however, there is a tendency for this plan to describe rather than to evaluate what has happened, and opportunities have been missed to include hard measures of success. The self-evaluation is generally accurate but occasionally generous in its judgements. Discrete management of the language college ensures a prominent role in wide-ranging professional development and community activities, for example, but strong management links across teams maintain a unified focus and direction for the school. Governors continue to play an effective part in the life of the school. Overall, the school continues to achieve good value for money in its use of resources, including all staff who work in the school, and it has good capacity to make further improvements.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The sixth form is good. From average starting points, students reach average standards overall, but achieve better in the VCE qualifications than in the traditional GCE A/S and A level examinations. Students make at least satisfactory progress overall, supported by care and guidance systems that are well thought out and effectively put into practice. For many students, advanced study presents personal challenges to which the school is sympathetic and for which it provides unstinting pastoral and academic support. Students are well informed about the standards of their day-to-day work, their target grades and what they should do to achieve

them. Specific guidance about the increasing demands of advanced study and how to apply for higher education motivates students to succeed; they appreciate and warmly praise the dedication of staff in providing extra teaching and advice when requested. Retention rates are very high, reflecting the high esteem in which students hold this provision. They very much enjoy being part of a sensitive community in which they feel valued, in which they are listened to and are given opportunities to develop responsibility, for example, through the work of the sixth form council. The director of sixth form is a passionate advocate of its strengths but is aware that standards in a number of subjects could be better. Self-evaluation is thorough but not always sufficiently evidenced to enable a sharp analysis of where improvement should most be targeted. The curriculum is good and meets students' needs appropriately, including links with another local authority school and an increasing emphasis on students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. General facilities and accommodation are satisfactory, but space remains at a premium and students would welcome greater access to ICT.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that all teachers of those students who are attending the Phoenix Centre are kept fully informed of attendance and other related learning matters that will ensure successful reintegration back into the mainstream lessons.
- Develop greater consistency and frequency of teachers' marking.

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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	2
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	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	2
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	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	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	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

24 June 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of St Aidan's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Comprehensive School, Sunderland, SR2 7HJ

You will be aware that I recently returned to St Aidan's with another inspector to assess the progress that the school has made since I last inspected it in November 2007. At that time, the school was issued with a Notice to Improve because of its failure to compile a single central register for Criminal Records Bureau (CRB), police and other identity checks. I am sure you will be pleased to know that the school now complies fully with all legal requirements for this register and I am, therefore, able to confirm that it no longer requires significant improvement. Overall, St Aidan's is a good and improving school. Those of you in Years 7 to 11 continue to achieve good standards and make good overall progress. In the sixth form, standards are more average and progress is satisfactory.

All the positive characteristics from the previous inspection have been maintained, and some have improved. The school continues to provide you with good quality care, guidance and support, which is resulting in the vast majority of you behaving well and attending school regularly. For the small number of you whose behaviour is disruptive to your own and others' learning in lessons, the school's specialist 'Phoenix Centre' provides you with well focused support to help you learn more effectively. However, the teachers who normally take your lessons when you are attending the centre are not always kept fully informed of your attendance and other related learning matters that will ensure your successful reintegration back into their mainstream lessons. We are, therefore, asking the school to improve the sharing of information between the centre and all teaching staff.

All those who spoke with inspectors said they enjoy the range of activities that the school offers, both in and out of lessons. Your teachers generally continue to provide you with good quality lessons, although there is still too much inconsistency in the frequency and quality of written marking across the curriculum. We are asking the school to improve this aspect of teaching.

Your teachers and governors remain committed to helping all of you achieve the very best that you can. You need to respond by continuing to work hard, listen carefully, and attend school regularly. On behalf of the inspection team, I wish you all the very best for the future.

Brian Blake

Her Majesty's Inspector