

Ellesmere Port Catholic High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	111451
Local Authority	Cheshire
Inspection number	325389
Inspection dates	18–19 March 2009
Reporting inspector	Leszek Iwaskow 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	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1064
Sixth form	164
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr J Coucill
Headteacher	Mr P Lee
Date of previous school inspection	14 November 2005
School address	Capenhurst Lane Whitby Ellesmere Port Cheshire CH65 7AQ
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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

Ellesmere Port Catholic High School is a larger than average voluntary-aided school which draws its intake from a broad social and academic range. The school is oversubscribed and has a popular sixth form. Most students continue into employment, further education or training. The percentage entitled to free school meals is increasing but remains below the national average. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is also well below the national average. The number from minority ethnic groups is increasing but continues to be low. The number of students joining or leaving the school throughout the year is also low. The school is in its first year of designation as a specialist school for humanities (English, history and religious education).

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Ellesmere Port Catholic High School is well respected by students and parents alike. It has some notable strengths, particularly its well established and caring Catholic ethos, the prowess of its students on the sporting field and its emerging humanities specialism. There are, however, areas which need further development. As a result, overall effectiveness is judged to be satisfactory.

Currently, some students achieve good results in their examinations and progress successfully into higher education and satisfying careers. From broadly average starting points, students make satisfactory progress to reach standards in line with the national average. Nevertheless, overall standards remain lower than they could be, as the quality of teaching and the curriculum is not yet consistently good across the school. The curriculum is satisfactory, although there are weaknesses in the provision for citizenship. Poor writing skills also continue to hold some students back. Students enjoy those subjects where they can become more actively involved in their learning and develop their thinking through debate and discussion. They are less enamoured when lessons lack challenge, are too teacher directed and are disrupted occasionally by poorer behaviour than is the norm. There remain inconsistencies across classes in the marking and presentation of students' work and in clarifying what they need to do to improve.

Students enjoy coming to school and feel safe in an inclusive and close knit community. They are well mannered, considerate and self-confident. They benefit from the wide range of sporting and enrichment opportunities the school offers and enjoy the many opportunities to represent the school at local and national level, especially on the basketball court. However, arrangements for students to voice their views are underdeveloped and provide them with too few opportunities to engage actively in changing their school and community for the better.

The recent acquisition of humanities specialist status is providing new opportunities to drive forward school improvement. Some managers and subject leaders are using this opportunity well to influence improvements in the classroom, develop links with the community and engage in broadening their expertise. However, this is not consistent across the school as some leaders are not being held fully to account for their responsibilities. Governors are supportive but do not always challenge to ensure greater accountability and provide impetus to fast-track improvements. There is a desire to move the school forward, which requires a collective response, if this is to happen quickly. Parents are very supportive and appreciative of the care the school provides. As one parent summed up: 'My child enjoys school, he is looked after well and is safe while he is there. I am glad he is a pupil at Ellesmere Port Catholic High School.' This provides a strong platform on which students can also build further academic success.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Standards in the sixth form are broadly satisfactory. There is a variation in achievement between subjects. Results in general studies are consistently poor. The monitoring of progress across departments is not sufficiently rigorous to enable challenge where performance is weaker. Personal development and well-being are good overall. Attendance figures have shown some improvement in Year 12, although attendance is less good in Year 13 and students are not always punctual in arriving at lessons. There are opportunities for some students to help younger ones in the school and in partner primary schools and to organise fundraising events. Teaching

and learning are satisfactory. The quality of teaching varies. Some examples of good and better teaching were observed, although students are not always given the opportunity to be actively involved in their own learning. While there is a wide range of subjects available, there are few alternative opportunities to the traditional A level and AS level routes apart from the provision to enhance GCSE results for a small minority of students. The students enjoy school, speak highly of the support and guidance they receive and describe the school as a caring community.

What the school should do to improve further

- Devolve leadership to enable greater sharing of responsibility and accountability to drive school improvement and raise standards more quickly.
- Enable the sharing of best practice to ensure consistently good outcomes across all subjects.
- Give students greater responsibility to enable them to participate more actively in improving their school and the community.
- Ensure that the curriculum meets the needs of all students, especially in making certain they receive the full entitlement to citizenship education.

A small proportion of the schools where overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Students enter school in Year 7 with standards broadly in line with national averages and make satisfactory progress as they move through the school.

In 2008, students in Year 9 achieved results in English that were above the agreed target and an improvement on previous years. In mathematics and science performance was below target levels. The school's tracking system indicates continued good performance in English over Key Stage 3 and an improving situation in science. There remain groups of students who are underachieving in mathematics.

In 2008 the proportion of students attaining at least five GCSE grades A* to C was in line with national averages. Numbers attaining five high grades that include English and mathematics were also in line with the national average. Around 99% of students leave school with at least one GCSE grade. There is no significant difference between boys' achievement and that of girls. There is, however, variability in performance across the different subject areas.

Achievement by students in the sixth form is also satisfactory and broadly in line with national expectations. There is awareness that in some subject areas students struggle to make the transition from AS to full A level.

Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve well and gain results that are above expectations when compared with similar students in other schools.

Initiatives to raise standards at all levels are being implemented. Reduced Year 9 class sizes for mathematics and a focus on improving writing across all subject areas have been welcomed by teachers and parents. Year 11 students are also able to access revision classes. Although these initiatives have yet to impact fully on examination performance, the tracking documents and mock examination results display encouraging signs of initial progress.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students say that they like their school, make good friends and enjoy their lessons. They have positive attitudes to learning and their attendance is good. They feel safe and secure and know who to turn to for support, confident that this will be provided for them. Students are encouraged to adopt a healthy lifestyle. They can talk readily about healthy eating and they are involved in a wide range of sports and extra-curricular activities. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Students are considerate and polite to one another and they work well together. They have positive relationships with staff and all feel included. Assemblies, personal, social and health education, and religious education lessons encourage them to be thoughtful, empathetic and caring. Behaviour is generally good, although weaker in lessons where teaching is less effective.

The head girl and head boy support the sixth form leadership team very effectively. Students accept responsibility well and develop social understanding and initiative as class captains or prefects. The school council is not yet fully democratic in constitution or organisation which reduces its impact on students' ability to voice their views. Curricular visits, for example to France and Germany, contribute well to the promotion of other cultures. The school misses some opportunities, however, such as through its links with schools in West Africa, to enhance wider cultural development and students' understanding of racial diversity.

Achievement is actively celebrated. Students make good progress in developing their personal qualities and work hard to gain merits and awards. They make good progress in core skills and achieve good levels of self-confidence and self-esteem. As yet, students do not have enough opportunities to develop work related and enterprise skills.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory. Most lessons observed were at least satisfactory and there were examples of good and outstanding teaching. There is also some ineffective teaching.

Teachers are confident and secure in their subject knowledge and in most lessons they are able to create a good work ethos in which students behave well. Lesson planning is variable, however, and recognition of the varying needs of students is not always apparent.

Where there is good and effective teaching, lesson objectives are clear and shared with students. Teachers in these lessons have high expectations and share their enthusiasm for their subject. It was a pleasure to observe lessons where students interacted with each other to share ideas and assess each other's work. The best lessons are taught at a rapid pace using a variety of methods and activities to maintain the momentum of learning. There is evidence of good direct questioning that enables all students to participate.

In the weaker lessons planning is minimal and little attention is paid to the differing needs of students in the group. An inability to recognise when an approach is not working or where there is an excess of teacher talk leads to students becoming bored and inattentive. It is when there is a lack of challenge that occasional low-level disruptive behaviour occurs.

There are inconsistencies in the quality of marking; some teachers are providing excellent constructive advice as to how work might be improved but there are too many instances where work goes unmarked, presentation deteriorates and there are no pointers for improvement.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The curriculum at Key Stage 3 meets statutory requirements apart from weaknesses in the coordination and delivery of citizenship. All students in Year 7 are now also following a 'learning to learn' programme aimed at developing their learning skills. Although enjoyable for students, there is little evidence yet that this is impacting on their learning in other lessons. At Key Stage 4 there is a broad range of GCSE subjects but there is little alternative provision for those students whose needs are not fully met by this traditional pathway. The opportunity for vocational options is limited to a choice from eight Level 1 courses for the equivalent of one day per week at the local college. Uptake remains low. The school recognises weaknesses in vocational provision and the current Year 9 students have also been offered alternatives of an increased flexibility college programme, three Young Apprenticeship and four Diploma pathways in addition to present provision. Physical education provision does not meet the recommended guidelines of two hours per week at Key Stage 4; however, there is a wide range of extra-curricular sporting activities which allow a majority of students to compensate for this. There is also a good variety of clubs on offer to meet different interests including chess, eco, film, drama and radio clubs. Several departments also provide extra time for valued coursework and booster sessions. The school's specialist status is also leading to increased enrichment opportunities.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The school provides good quality care, guidance and support. Arrangements to ensure students' health and safety are in place and procedures for safeguarding are rigorous and meet current government requirements. Child protection and risk assessment procedures are robust and known to all staff. Relationships between staff and students are good. Staff know students and their families very well, and they use this knowledge to encourage good attendance and promote their enjoyment of learning. Students with additional needs receive effective support. The POD (place of development) is well regarded and open to all. It coordinates a good range of additional services to extend and enhance students' learning skills.

The school's system for tracking individual progress has improved since the previous inspection but overall remains underdeveloped. Students are now more routinely involved in evaluating their own work and progress. In all years, including the sixth form, students know how well they are doing. However, guidance to help them to improve their work is better in some subjects than others. Parents are well informed about their children's progress and 'praise letters' sent home celebrate particular achievements.

Older students have the opportunity to discuss their option and career choices with teachers and careers advisers at key points during their time at school. As a result, they are able to make more relevant decisions regarding future placements and most choose to remain in full-time education.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Leadership and management are judged to be satisfactory overall. Since the last inspection there has been a restructuring of responsibilities at all levels. There is also now a clearer vision for the school encapsulated in the newly acquired humanities specialist school status. However, decision making and accountability are not yet sufficiently devolved or developed at all levels to ensure that initiatives are efficiently managed to ensure consistently good outcomes for all students. As a result, although progress has been made in some areas, in other areas impact has been slower. Coordination and continuity has not always been managed effectively due to inconsistencies in the management of some subjects and areas of the school. However, some leaders have, through their drive and initiative, developed their subjects or areas of responsibility well. For example, the quality of provision in history has been commented on positively by students and ensured its popularity at examination level. Equally, many parents are pleased with the changes in support for vulnerable students and those with additional needs. There is evidence to show that the quality of teaching and learning is improving in some subjects while in others it does not always stimulate learning or lead to an improvement in standards.

The school discharges its duty to promote race, gender and disability equality adequately. There are few students from minority ethnic backgrounds in the school but these are well supported and integrated with everyday school life. Polish students spoke positively about the help they received. However, teaching and the curriculum do not currently enable all subjects to make a greater contribution to promoting a broader understanding of the diverse and changing world around them. The impact of specialist humanities status is at an early stage of development but it has already boosted cooperative working with partner primary schools through developing teaching resources in religious education, history and English as well as work on improving writing.

Governors oversee the management of the school estate well and ensure that the budget is balanced. Their role in holding the management of the school to account is less well developed and slow progress in improving some areas has not always been challenged. Overall, the school provides satisfactory value for money.

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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?	3	3
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?	3	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	3
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?	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	
The extent to which 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	3	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	3	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	2

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	3	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	3	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3	
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	

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

This letter is to tell you about our recent visit to your school to inspect the quality of the education you are experiencing. The inspectors particularly enjoyed meeting you and talking to you about your lessons, the activities you are involved in and how you are treated and looked after. We found what you told us to be very interesting and informative and it helped us come to the decision that your school provides you with a satisfactory standard of education. Although there are some aspects which are good, particularly the way in which the school supports and looks after you, there still remain areas which need to be made even better.

Most of you told us you enjoyed coming to school. You are proud of your achievements whether these are on the basketball court or on the sporting field as well as in your lessons and examinations. The inspectors feel that with a little more help you could do even better. To do this we have asked your teachers to share good practice, especially in those subjects you particularly enjoy. You prefer it when teachers allow you to work practically and collaboratively and participate in discussion and debate. The teachers intend to take your preferences into account when planning their lessons to make sure that you make better progress. You too can play your part by working and trying harder, particularly in mathematics and science and in improving your writing.

You are keen to take a part in wider school and community life and many of you take advantage of the many sporting and after-school activities offered. However, you also felt that your views are not always taken into account. Therefore we have asked the school to provide more opportunities for you to become involved in the school council and other democratic groups in your school. You will also notice that the school will be looking at ways to broaden the range of courses and subjects that you will be able to take examinations in. The school also intends to provide you with more lessons in citizenship which will encourage you to appreciate the important role you have to play as responsible young adults and world citizens.

Your headteacher is determined to work with all his staff to share responsibilities to ensure that these improvements are put in place as soon as possible to enhance your time and experiences in the school. With your help and cooperation we are sure they will succeed. On behalf of the inspection team I wish you all the best for your future lives and careers. God bless.