

St Benedict's Catholic High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	112398
Local Authority	Cumbria
Inspection number	325597
Inspection dates	22–23 June 2009
Reporting inspector	Judith Straw

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)	1408
Sixth form	232
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr John McCoy
Headteacher	Mrs Ann Brook
Date of previous school inspection	1 January 2006
School address	Red Lonning Hensingham Whitehaven Cumbria CA28 8UG
Telephone number	01946 852680
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by five additional inspectors.

Description of the school

St Benedict's is a much larger than average Catholic high school which serves a wide catchment area in West Cumbria. The proportion of students entitled to free school meals is just below average, although many students come from backgrounds of relative social deprivation. The overwhelming majority of students come from White British backgrounds and very few students are at an early stage of learning English. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is just above average and an average number have a statement of special educational needs. The school has been a specialist engineering college since 2002 and has the Healthy Schools Award. It recently became one of only ten schools nationally to achieve advanced status in study support and also recently achieved the International Schools Award. A new headteacher took up her post in March 2008.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

St Benedict's is a satisfactory school with many good features. Strong and committed leadership from the previous acting headteacher, the current headteacher, the senior leadership team and the governors have steered the school through a very difficult period.

A good curriculum combined with very effective pastoral care and support, and the nurturing Christian ethos of the school have ensured that students' personal development and well-being are good. Students are articulate, thoughtful and positive. The school works hard to raise students' aspirations and prepare them for their future lives.

Since the time of the last inspection standards have dipped but are now rising again. Students enter the school with broadly average attainment and reach average standards by the end of Year 11. In 2008, students reached average standards in GCSE, including English and mathematics. This represents satisfactory progress over their five years in school. In some subjects students make better progress, for example, in the school's specialist area of engineering. Inspection evidence confirms that standards are slowly rising but not yet at such a rate as to indicate good progress overall. Targets are set for all students throughout their time in school but there has been a lack of clarity about these targets and the school's system for gathering data on students' performance and tracking their progress was complicated and applied inconsistently. The new leadership team has introduced systems to improve target-setting and the organisation and effectiveness of the tracking and monitoring of student progress. These changes to tracking and monitoring systems are now beginning to impact on student outcomes.

Students behave well, attendance is just above average and rising, and the vast majority say that they enjoy school and appreciate all that it has to offer. Students understand the importance of staying healthy. High numbers participate in sporting activities offered during the day and after school. They appreciate the importance of eating sensibly and the good range of healthy foods at lunchtime. Students of all ages say they feel safe and secure in school. Bullying is rare and they know that it will be sorted out quickly and effectively. They are well briefed on how to stay safe when using information and communication technology. The large majority of the parents who responded to the questionnaire were fulsome in their praise of the school. Many wrote about the excellent care their children receive and the academic progress they are making.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory but some teaching lacks the challenge and pace to motivate students to exceed expectations. The new leadership team has rightly identified that this is one of the reasons why overall achievement is currently not better than satisfactory. There is good teaching in many subject areas but not yet enough to impact on standards. Some subject leaders have been overgenerous in their assessments of teaching and learning. The marking of students' work in some subject areas is not sufficiently detailed or helpful. Senior leaders have brought in additional support for some departments and well-conceived and targeted strategies are in place to improve the quality of teaching. In addition to the rich and varied curriculum, opportunities for enrichment are especially good and this takes the form of a wide range of visits and extra-curricular activities. These are offered under the school's extensive study support programme. Students are encouraged to develop their skills both in lessons and through a range of other activities.

Leadership and management are satisfactory. The new senior leadership team has acted quickly to introduce strategies designed to improve teaching and learning, raise standards and ensure

middle managers become more accountable. Early evidence suggests that these are impacting on progress and the school expects students to perform above expectations this year. The school makes a very positive impact in the local community through its links with the church, many businesses and industry and other local schools and colleges. The school also has a wide range of international links.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

This is a good sixth form. Results for A-level examinations in 2008 varied between subjects, but were average overall, and better than those for 2007. Most students successfully completed their A-level courses, with a third gaining passes at the higher grades A or B. Current standards in the sixth form are average, and school data predict similar examination outcomes for 2009.

The sixth form curriculum offers a good range of academic A-level courses. These are supplemented by a growing range of vocational opportunities at differing levels, including an accredited course for all students that promotes their skills and personal effectiveness. While entry requirements are suitably stringent, the school is flexible. It works hard to ensure that all students who wish to join the sixth form are offered courses that are suitable in relation to their abilities and interests. Given their varying starting points, most students achieve well. Achievement is notably good in English, health and social care, food technology and business studies.

The personal development of students is good. They play a full part in the life of the school. In addition to providing positive role models, they help to organise many activities in school and support younger students in their reading. They participate fully in a wide range of additional opportunities to enrich their studies, for example, through the Tanzanian project, Young Enterprise, and engineering projects. They gain in stature as they move through the sixth form, and leave as confident, articulate and responsible young people.

Teaching and learning are good overall, with significant strengths in the teachers' subject knowledge. Students have positive attitudes to learning and work hard to succeed. Their performance and progress are closely monitored, and excellent support is provided to ensure that they do as well as they should. Leadership and management in the sixth form are good. Both current and past students are very appreciative of the support they receive, particularly from the head of the sixth form and the student support officer, who work closely together in developing the sixth form provision. Strong guidance and encouragement are provided when planning future education choices. As a result, the number applying for higher education this year has almost doubled.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards by more rigorous and challenging teaching and by improving the quality and extent of marking.
- Improve the use of data in the day-to-day work of the school to ensure there is a consistent and systematic approach to monitoring and evaluating teaching, learning and the tracking of students' progress.

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

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Students enter school having reached standards that are broadly average. Progress in Years 7 to 9 is accelerating and the standards reached at Key Stage 3 were above national averages in 2008; this trend is set to continue in 2009. By the time students reach Year 11, some have made good progress but overall most have made satisfactory progress reaching standards in GCSE, including in mathematics and English, which are broadly in line with national averages. In some subjects, including the school's specialist subject, engineering, standards achieved in 2008 were significantly above national averages. These include also design and technology, English literature, science and physical education. The slower progress of boys seen in 2008 has been addressed. Evidence from lesson observations, scrutiny of current work, examination work already marked and moderated and the school's tracking data indicates that standards are rising by the end of Year 11. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make satisfactory progress. Carefully focused intervention plans for these students are helping to ensure they receive well targeted support to develop their learning and secure sound progress.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students' personal development, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, is good. Students enjoy school and their lessons, particularly where they take an active part or are learning independently. Most students attend school regularly and this is a reflection of students' positive commitment to school activities and learning. Behaviour is good in lessons and around the school. Students are appreciative of the positive relationships they have with their teachers and each other and are sensitive towards each other's needs and feelings. The role of the counsellor is valued by students and has had significant impact on the well-being of a number of vulnerable students. Students make a good contribution to their own school community and the wider community. The school council has been involved in improving school meals, and has contributed to staff appointments. Students are committed to charitable fundraising. They contribute positively to fundraising events for both this country and for projects in Africa. They are developing an awareness of other cultures through their links with schools in Europe and Africa. The curriculum is improving their understanding of a range of faith groups in this country through religious education and art. Sound standards and a curriculum which gives opportunities to develop enterprise skills ensure students are well prepared for life beyond school.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Teaching and learning are satisfactory. In a significant number of lessons seen during the inspection, teaching was good. Students benefit from their teachers' good subject knowledge and lessons are characterised by good working relationships. In the best lessons, teachers engage students' interest by carefully planning for learning, using a range of interesting activities closely matched to their learning needs. In these lessons students are highly involved, enthusiastic and able to take an active part in the lesson, enjoying working with their peers. Questioning challenges students to think deeply and apply their learning to solve complex

problems. As a result, students are able to meet the high expectations set and make good progress. However, this is not the case across the school. Satisfactory lessons lack challenge. Students are not actively involved, often becoming passive as teachers talk at length. As a result, learning takes place at a much slower rate. There are fewer opportunities to work in groups and little evidence of matching work to students' levels of ability. Well targeted support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities ensures they make the same progress as their peers.

The marking of students' work is very variable. In some subjects, such as English and modern foreign languages, students have the opportunity to assess their own work. They receive regular and helpful feedback from teachers which celebrates where they have made good progress and explains where they need to improve. In other subjects, there is little attention given to the presentation of written work and little evidence of marking. Targets are set for students in all subjects. However, their understanding of how to achieve these targets is not yet fully understood by all students. Progress towards these is regularly monitored through a system of regular, formal assessments. Parents are well informed, receiving helpful updates on progress following each assessment.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum is good. It is broad and balanced and meets statutory requirements. Students in Key Stage 3 follow a common curriculum. Progression routes are clear in Key Stage 4 and a wide range of choices is offered to students of all abilities. These include the opportunity to study three separate subjects in science and the chance to study either GCSE or vocational courses in business studies depending on their individual needs. Lower attaining students in Key Stage 4 take advantage of good alternative curriculum provision including those who follow the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) courses offered by external providers. The school has good links with a local college of further education and there are plans to provide an engineering diploma from September 2009. The school's specialist status as an engineering college has had a significant impact in many areas of the school. The department has led improvements to teaching and learning and is one of the best performing departments. A wide range of GCSE, A level and vocational courses, including a Young Apprentice scheme is available to all students. Cross-curricular projects and engineering impact days ensure that students have a good understanding of engineering and technology through work in other subjects such as geography and food technology. The school has good links with local primary and secondary schools, and industry.

A broad range of clubs, from those developing sports and music to a Dr Who club, are available and take-up is monitored closely. These are valued and well supported by students. Students are given opportunities to take responsibilities in this area by joining the study support student committee which helps decide on which new activities to offer.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The quality of pastoral care and support provided by the school is outstanding. This is evident in the way the school supports any vulnerable students in a proactive manner. Students at risk are identified early and the school works hard to form good partnerships with parents. A wide range of support in school is available, using both teaching and non-teaching staff such as the volunteer counsellor. Good links with many external agencies provide additional support.

Students who have accessed this support were confident that it had made a real difference to their education and their lives. Other students were clear that if they needed help it would be provided and they were confident about approaching any member of the school staff if a problem arose.

The school is working on a variety of strategies to improve attendance further. Safeguarding measures meet statutory requirements and arrangements for risk assessments are robust. Students identified that the school gives them good opportunities to develop healthy lifestyles. Staff show a high level of commitment to encouraging enjoyment and nurturing the students in their care. However, strategies for accelerating progress and maximising the academic potential of some students are not yet as effective as they could be.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

A sense of purpose now pervades the school following an unsettled and difficult period. The new headteacher has vision and commitment and an agenda for improvement. She and the new senior team have acted quickly to evaluate how to take the school forward and improve it. Senior leaders have recognised that while the school has many strengths in its provision for students' personal, social, moral and cultural development, a wide curriculum and excellent pastoral care, more needs to be done to accelerate academic progress, improve teaching and learning and raise standards overall. They recognise the importance of setting high expectations for the standards to be reached by all students across the school. Target-setting systems are developing to ensure that students have appropriately challenging targets. The school is beginning to monitor the progress of individuals towards targets and is actively developing strategies to address difficulties in progression where they arise. Self-evaluation is mainly accurate but in some areas slightly too generous.

The school makes a good contribution to community cohesion. There are many strong local links and wider links with schools in this country and abroad. Managers are monitoring the impact of what is provided and seeking ways to improve students' understanding of the diversity of British society.

Governance is satisfactory. The governors are proactive in ensuring that there are good improvements to the accommodation but they have been less challenging in holding the school to account. The school gives satisfactory value for money. The capacity for improvement is good because the new management team have acted quickly to improve quality assurance procedures and improve teaching. These changes are beginning to impact on standards and progress. Improvement since the last inspection has been satisfactory.

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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	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?	3	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	3	

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	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 learners' needs?	3	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

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3	2
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	2
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	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**

24 June 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of St Benedict's Catholic High School, Cumbria, CA28 8UG

Thank you for making us so welcome when we inspected your school this week. We enjoyed talking to many of you and hearing your views about school. We would like to inform you of the outcome of our visit.

We found that your school is providing you with a satisfactory education. You are making satisfactory progress in your work and your school does many things well. You have the personal qualities which will enable you to succeed in life. You are very well cared for, feel safe from any form of intimidation or bullying and you know how important it is to adopt a healthy lifestyle. You enjoy all that school has to offer and take part in many activities outside lesson time. Most of you work hard and show respect for each other and for adults. Teachers work hard to ensure you enjoy lessons and make progress. Senior leaders are committed to making the school even better. Students in the sixth form achieve well and are good role models for the rest of the school.

The inspectors discussed with your teachers two areas to work on which will make your school even better.

- Raise standards by ensuring that all teaching is challenging and that marking helps you to improve.
- Improve the way the school uses assessment data to ensure you make consistently better progress.

We would like to wish you and your school every success in the future.

Yours faithfully

Judith Straw, on behalf of the inspection team.

Lead inspector