

St Thomas More Catholic School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	112971
Local Authority	Derbyshire
Inspection number	325731
Inspection dates	10–11 December 2008
Reporting inspector	Victoria Godley

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	397
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Father Dennis Higgins
Headteacher	Mrs Kate Lamb
Date of previous school inspection	14 June 2006
School address	Palace Fields Buxton Derbyshire SK17 6AF
Telephone number	01298 23167
Fax number	01298 25816

Age group	11–16
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by three Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

St Thomas More is a smaller than average Catholic comprehensive school. It became a specialist science college in September 2004. The school is a member of a federation of 11 secondary schools in the Peak and Derbyshire Dales known as Peak 11. This group are involved in many initiatives including extending vocational provision. The school draws students from a wide rural area. The great majority of them are from White British backgrounds and almost all have English as their first language. Students' attainment on entry is broadly average. The proportion of students with a statement of educational needs is above average. However, the total number of students registered by the school as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those with statements, is broadly in line with the national average. Few students are eligible for free school meals or come from areas experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

St Thomas More is a good school with some outstanding features. Students feel valued and achieve well. Overall students make good progress by the time they leave school and in some subjects, such as science, progress is outstanding. Standards of attainment are at least above average, and often high, but could improve further in mathematics.

The personal development and well-being of students are outstanding. They have an excellent understanding of what constitutes a healthy diet and how to lead an active and healthy lifestyle. Since the completion of the new sports facilities there has been an increased take up of sporting activities across the school and a large majority of students take part in one of the many school clubs. Students' behaviour is excellent and their attendance is outstanding; they feel safe and greatly enjoy coming to school. An important reason for this is the sense of a community spirit that exists across the school. As one student said, 'We all look out for each other.'

Student leadership is very well embedded across the school and the contribution of the student council is good. The school is an integral part of the local community and links with external partners extremely well. The school has made good progress in developing its science specialism. Good practice within science has been shared with all other subject departments. This includes improving the quality of teaching and learning, for example, through staff training events and cross-curricular themed work. Specialist status has also been used effectively to enhance the teaching of science and mathematics in primary partner schools.

Inspectors agree with the school that teaching and learning are good overall. Teachers have good subject knowledge and relationships are conducive to a supportive learning environment. The teaching and support staff are energetic and highly committed which successfully encourages and motivates students. Students show very good attitudes to their learning. However, there are inconsistencies across the school in the regular setting of homework and the way in which teachers use marking to help students improve further.

The school is making a good contribution to community cohesion through specialist college activities, strong parental and community links, the outstanding curriculum, which increases students' life chances, and by providing a greater understanding of UK and global communities. For example, students support many international charities such as Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), and speakers come into school and share their experiences.

The school is led and managed well. Line management is robust, communication is good, and self-evaluation is well informed, although this could become more consistent and rigorous in order to continue to drive improvement.

The outstanding care, guidance and support that students receive enables them to achieve their potential as learners. Students' key skills are developed at each stage and standards in literacy and numeracy are good. Parents feel well informed about what is happening in school through regular newsletters and through communication in students' planners. They appreciate the wide range of opportunities available for their children and the caring Catholic ethos and principles of the school. Good rates of progress, rising standards, an outstanding curriculum and strengthened senior management demonstrate that the school has good capacity to improve further. The school provides good value for money.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards and achievement further in mathematics at Key Stage 4.

- Develop more rigour and consistency in self-evaluation by leaders at all levels across the school.
- Extend opportunities for students to consolidate learning through consistent and purposeful use of homework and marking that guides improvement.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Achievement and standards are good overall with some outstanding features. Students enter the school with broadly average standards of attainment. By the end of Key Stage 3 in 2007 students achieved standards which were slightly above national averages. The school's data indicates that standards at Key Stage 3 rose further in 2008. The proportion of students achieving five or more A* to C grades at GCSE including mathematics and English over the last three years is well above the national average. By the time they leave the school, students reach exceptionally high standards in science, and high standards in English. However, in mathematics they reach standards that are slightly above the national average.

Students make good progress overall by the time they leave school, with outstanding progress in science. Progress in mathematics shows indications of improvement but could improve further at Key Stage 4. GCSE results for 2008 are very good in art, biology, design and technology, music and vocational studies.

The school has targeted groups of students well, for instance achievement amongst boys, and in 2008 these students achieved considerably better results than they have in the past. Senior leaders have accurately identified the subjects that need to improve more quickly and they form part of the school's focus for regular monitoring.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

The distinctive ethos of this faith school encourages students to develop their personal values and grow in spiritual and moral maturity. Students very much enjoy coming to school, which is reflected in their outstanding attendance. They speak positively about the school's family atmosphere and the learning opportunities it offers. Students relate extremely well to each other and to their teachers, enabling them to become articulate and personable young adults. Students behave extremely sensibly around school and feel happy and secure. Racial incidents are very few and bullying is rare. If it does arise, it is dealt with swiftly in this supportive environment. There is a clearly understood behaviour system that positively encourages all students to achieve and, to the school's credit, there has been no incident of permanent exclusion from the school in the last ten years.

Students show a remarkable understanding of the importance of a healthy diet and there is an excellent choice of healthy meals available at school. The new sports hall is supporting students to benefit further from physical exercise in and out of the classroom. Students have many opportunities to take responsibility in school and beyond. They are enthusiastic about fund raising for charity, and committed to contributing to community projects and giving their time to others who are less fortunate. Comprehensive taught programmes for religious education (RE) and personal, social and health education (PSHE) and a wide range of other school events provide opportunities for students to become well informed, thoughtful citizens. These opportunities also help them develop the relevant knowledge and skills required for further study and employment.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teachers and support staff form good relationships with students, who are confident and keen to learn. Students ask questions to develop their understanding, enjoy their lessons and, subsequently, progress in lessons is good. Less able students make similar progress to others in class through targeted support and careful use of teaching assistants. Lessons are planned well. As a specialist school, teaching and learning are enhanced by a wide range of resources which are used well to improve learning. Teachers have good subject knowledge and use this effectively to support students' understanding, providing clear explanations and demonstrating skills and techniques effectively. On occasions, over directed teaching constrains independent learning opportunities and problem solving. Homework is set inconsistently across subjects and marking does not offer students regular and clear advice about how to improve their work. Consequently, for some students, there is sometimes a missed opportunity.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The school offers a wide-ranging curriculum. One of the key strengths at Key Stage 4 is the degree of personalisation and excellent provision for vocational and work-related learning which is enhanced by the school's active involvement in the Peak 11 federation. The Key Stage 3 curriculum provides opportunities and approaches which broaden the experience of students and meet the needs of learners well. For example, the school's specialism ensures that Key Stage 3 students quickly encounter good contemporary approaches to scientific topics; the school at the same time ensures that students gain a good grounding in the arts through provision for art, music, dance and drama. There is an excellent broad range of extra-curricular activities that are regular, well attended and successfully meet the needs and interest of students. These include boccia, the jazz band, Duke of Edinburgh scheme and many more. The enthusiastic delivery of these activities by a wide range of staff and the inclusive nature of these events further drive the community spirit found throughout the school.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

The school prides itself in welcoming and providing for students with a wide range of specific needs. Links with outside agencies are outstanding in promoting excellent student well-being. Support for these students is thoughtfully and flexibly organised so that they can perform to the best of their ability. High attaining and talented students are identified well and there is a developing programme to challenge and extend them further.

The induction arrangements for students coming to the school, including links with the older students known as 'Guardian Angels', are highly effective. Pastoral councillors play a key role in keeping a close eye on each student and are available to all year groups. Guidance in options at the end of Year 9 is very thorough and based on the school's excellent knowledge of the interests and aptitudes of its students. Careers education is also very good, helping make a smooth transition to college or employment.

Since the previous inspection, a more formalised system for monitoring academic progress is in place and information is better shared with all teachers, students and parents. Intervention

for key students is swiftly identified and acted upon for those who may need additional support. The statutory requirements for the safeguarding of students are robust and procedures for health and safety are securely in place.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The headteacher is supported very well by the senior leadership team. Together they are focused on raising standards and achievement. All staff are involved in self-evaluation and understand that they too are accountable for raising standards and achievement. However, this involvement could be improved further to ensure greater rigour and consistency at all levels. There have been rapid and impressive improvements in standards and progress, especially at Key Stage 4. The very good systems of rewards and recognition ensure that students feel extremely well supported and valued. The curriculum provides increasingly good opportunities for all groups of students to make good progress and succeed. Leadership at all levels takes account of the views of students, parents and other stakeholders, and looks to embrace good practice from elsewhere, for example sharing good practice and training opportunities with the local community school. The governors bring a range of expertise, which they use well to support the school's plans and developments. Finances and resources are well managed, particularly in relation to the current new build of the sports facilities.

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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?	1
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	1
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?	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1

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	1
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	1
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**

12 December 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of St Thomas More Catholic School, Buxton, SK17 6AF

Thank you for welcoming the inspection team into your school. We appreciated how you talked to us in your lessons and shared your opinions about St Thomas More. Your views and those of your parents have helped us to understand what your school is like.

Your school is one that is ambitious for all of you and keeps improving the range of opportunities you have to study and to pursue extra-curricular activities.

What we liked most about your school

- The good standards you achieve generally during your time at school, particularly in the specialist area of science.
- The good leadership of the school by the head teacher, senior leaders and governors.
- Your excellent behaviour, manners and attitude towards school
- The majority of the teaching is good and helps you to do your best.
- The excellent care, guidance and support available for you.
- The excellent curriculum opportunities available to you.
- The interest your parents show in the school and the fact that the vast majority of them rightly believe it is a good school.

What we have asked your school to do now

- Further raise standards and achievement at Key Stage 4 in mathematics.
- Provide more opportunities for you to consolidate learning through consistent and purposeful use of homework and marking that helps you to improve further.
- Develop more rigour and consistency in self-evaluation by leaders at all levels across the school.

I am sure you will continue to play your part in making this an even better school by working closely with your teachers to improve your work and achieve as well as you can. I wish you well for the future.

Yours sincerely

Victoria Godley

Lead inspector