

Notre Dame RC School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	113552
Local Authority	Plymouth
Inspection number	325844
Inspection dates	12–13 May 2009
Reporting inspector	Paul Sadler

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	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	826
Sixth form	135
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Edith Brash
Headteacher	Fiona Hutchings
Date of previous school inspection	1 December 2005
School address	Looseleigh Lane Derriford Plymouth PL6 5HN
Telephone number	01752 775101
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Age group	11–19
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by four additional inspectors.

Description of the school

This relatively small Roman Catholic girls' school draws around half its students from Catholic families in the wider Plymouth area. The remainder, who come from a wide range of backgrounds, live in the local area and beyond. The proportion of students with a variety of learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below average. The proportion at an early stage of learning English, while significant, is also below average.

Boys are admitted into the sixth form. The school is a member of The Linked Partnership (TLP) of five schools as well as the Tamar Valley Consortium which includes FE colleges and Training providers. This allows students, mainly in the sixth form but to some extent also in Years 10 and 11, to study a wider range of courses than would otherwise be the case.

During the inspection there was no teaching of Year 10 as all students were undertaking work experience. Many students in Year 11 and some in the sixth form were sitting public examinations.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good school. It has a number of outstanding features, most notably the personal development of the students which is founded in their exceptionally strong spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. The inclusive ethos of the school celebrates success and diversity. It develops in all students skills of leadership and teamwork and an appreciation of the strengths and feelings of other people. It is initiated through the Year 7 'Ubuntu' programme, designed personally by the headteacher. A further notable feature is the depth of involvement of the sixth form in all aspects of the school's life. This provides role and leadership models to which all younger girls can and do aspire. Behaviour is outstanding, and students have an excellent understanding of healthy lifestyles and of maintaining their personal safety. Governors and school leaders have created a climate that makes an outstanding contribution to equality of opportunity and community cohesion.

Following a disappointing set of GCSE results in 2008, the school has worked hard to raise standards, especially in mathematics and science. Inspectors saw very convincing evidence in students' work and the school's tracking of their progress that the current Year 11 are on track to achieve or exceed the challenging target of 64% attaining five or more good GCSE passes, including English and mathematics. These above average standards represent good achievement as students start school in Year 7 having attained average standards at primary school. Achievement in the sixth form is also good, as students attain average standards from starting points that are below average.

The school makes good use of its status as a specialist school for humanities, in which English, drama and religious education (RE) are the lead subjects. Standards in English and drama have been consistently above average and these departments take a lead in developing teaching and learning across the school. RE is also developing well after a less successful period. The school has excellent links with its extensive range of partners, not least parents who are almost universal in their support and praise for the school. 'My daughter has blossomed since coming here. I feel she is cared for – not just academically.' This is a typical comment by the parent of a Year 11 student. The school makes excellent use of its partnerships with agencies and other schools, and with the local authority, whose support is valued highly by governors and school leaders. These links enable the good curriculum to offer wider opportunities to students. They are further enhanced by events such as the popular enrichment week which allows students to visit places as distant as China and Los Angeles.

Teaching is good throughout the school, although there is some variation in the clarity with which the purpose of the lesson is explained to students. A strength is teachers' knowledge of their subjects and their students. This enables the latter to make the best possible progress, for instance by enabling able dance students to take GCSE as early as Year 8. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities also make good progress, often due in part to the good support of teaching assistants. All students know how well they are doing in each subject, although the impact of marking and other guidance that enables them to improve their work is variable. Able and enthusiastic subject leaders are enabling improvements in the quality of teaching and learning, which is leading to improved progress and higher standards in subjects including science, mathematics and RE. Superb new facilities including a sports hall and a library are contributing to higher standards, for instance in physical education (PE).

All students receive excellent care and guidance for the next stage of their education. Governors and senior leaders have a good knowledge of the school's many strengths and few weaknesses and have taken effective action to correct the latter, for instance on raising standards. Occasionally, monitoring is not as sharp as it might be, for example in reviewing students' use of their 'planners'. Overall, there have been many improvements since the last inspection and the school is in a good position for these to continue.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The good sixth form provision is enhanced by its partnership with other schools, colleges and training providers, so most students are able to follow the courses they have chosen at an appropriate level. Standards are rising, partly due to the more challenging targets the school has set itself, especially to achieve the higher grades at A level. Students benefit from the care taken in giving them individual guidance, as a result of which almost all progress to higher education. Vocational courses are a strength which enables students, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, to succeed. Teaching is good and is sometimes excellent, as seen in a biology lesson where the teacher made her high expectations clear while treating the students appropriately as young adults. Students have many opportunities to display leadership and be involved in school life, for example in the school senate and by mentoring younger students. They enjoy life in the well-led sixth form, and rightly speak very highly of the school.

What the school should do to improve further

- In order to enable the best possible progress, ensure that the students are always clear about the purpose of the teaching and of the tasks they undertake, as is already the case in the best lessons.
- Ensure that monitoring at all levels is always precise and useful. This should include both the monitoring of school-wide issues by leaders and managers, and the monitoring of individual students' work and progress by teachers in order to give advice and guidance to enable the students to improve their work.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

In 2008, standards attained in GCSE were below average. The school responded quickly to this situation, implementing changes in teaching and subject leadership. These actions have led to a rise in standards in a number of subjects, including mathematics, science, RE and modern foreign languages. Standards in PE are also rising, in part due to new facilities. In other subjects, including English, drama and history, standards have remained consistently above average. On the basis of a wide range of work seen by inspectors, discussions with students, and analysis of a comprehensive range of data provided by the school, it is clear that standards of work produced by current students are above average. In the past, students made more rapid progress in Years 7 to 9 than in Years 10 and 11. They are now making consistently good progress throughout these years. The average standards currently attained by sixth form students are also rising. Overall, this represents good achievement by students of all ages throughout the school.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Students have an excellent understanding of how to keep healthy and generally adopt a sensible, balanced diet. They now have enhanced opportunities for sport and exercise in the new sports hall, and many enthusiastically take part in activities such as rock-climbing and fitness training. They are aware of dangers such as substance abuse and of matters of sexual health. Students say they feel very safe in school and that there is little bullying, any which occurs being dealt with effectively. All students spoken to by inspectors said they enjoy school. Attendance is satisfactory and the school works hard to improve, especially, the attendance of the most persistent absentees, many of whom have long-term health problems. Students make an excellent contribution to the community, both within school where they have many opportunities to take responsibility and more widely such as through membership of the Youth Parliament, where students have represented Plymouth at the national gathering in London. Another excellent example was a lunchtime talent contest, organised by the sixth form, where high quality acts by students of all ages were enthusiastically encouraged by staff and a large number of their peers. All the skills that students will need in adult life are developing well, with particular strengths in teamwork, leadership, communication and emotional literacy.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

The quality of teaching and learning is good with evidence of some outstanding practice. Learners show good attitudes to their work and make good progress as a result of effective teaching. In many classes, students are able to work well in groups and independently. In the better lessons, a range of assessment techniques are used. The majority of classes are managed effectively and learners respond to the challenges. The relationships between teachers and students are very good and are built upon respect. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) to support and add stimulus to the learning is developing well in most areas. In science, and in an assembly, it was used with sensitivity and creativity. In some subjects, students have many opportunities to assess their own and each other's work. Teaching assistants are deployed in a range of lessons and provide good support to students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

In the relatively small proportion of less effective lessons, the purpose of the lesson or activity is not made clear to students, so they are confused. Marking is also of variable quality and does not always show the student how the work might be improved.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The school has begun to use the greater flexibility, available following changes to the National Curriculum and its assessment, to restructure the curriculum in order to make it more responsive to individual student's needs. Students in Years 7 to 9 study a good range of subjects, and benefit from many opportunities to enhance their personal development, such as in drama. There is also a good range of courses for students in Years 10 and 11. To reflect the Catholic ethos of the school, all students study RE to examination level. French and Spanish are both available as well as a good range of opportunities in PE including dance. The school rightly

plans to expand its range of vocational courses in September 2009. There is an excellent range of additional activities available including sport, faith groups and opportunities for foreign travel.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The school provides very good care for all its students and all arrangements to safeguard their welfare meet or exceed the requirements. The personal knowledge that staff have of their students, and their flexibility in supporting their very wide range of personal circumstances contributes strongly to the very high level of confidence that parents and students have in the school. Students with learning difficulties are supported well and new accommodation helps to meet the needs of those with physical disabilities. Students get very good guidance for the next stage of their education, but the quality of marking and other help to improve their work is variable.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

As a result of the work of governors and senior leaders, the school has a very clear direction and purpose that is strongly supported by students and their parents, and by staff. In some areas, this work has had an excellent impact, for example on students' personal development, and in promoting equality of opportunity and community cohesion where an audit of the school's work has been carried out and an action plan put in place. Monitoring of key areas, such as of students' progress and the quality of teaching, is accurate and is effective in promoting improvement. In a few areas, such as the analysis of behavioural data, monitoring occurs but is currently insufficiently precise to contribute to improvement. Middle leadership is of good quality and all staff are well supported by effective performance management and professional development. The humanities specialism is used well to enhance the development of a wide range of subjects, and the challenging targets set as a result are largely met. Governors support the school well and have had an especially effective input in financial management, in developing the inclusive ethos of the school and on improving the accommodation. Rightly, proposed changes in approach are planned to improve the impact of their monitoring on raising standards.

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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?	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?	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	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	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	3	
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	2	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of 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

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

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

28 May 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Notre Dame Roman Catholic School, Plymouth PL6 5HN

Thank you to those of you who spoke with us when we visited recently. We found you articulate, confident and rightly positive about your school. These are the main findings of our inspection.

As you and your parents told us, Notre Dame is a good school. It has a number of outstanding features, especially the way in which it helps you to become confident young women (and, in the sixth form, young men) that have the skills you will need to lead successful adult lives. In particular, it helps you to understand the world from the perspective of the many different groups of people who live in it, and also how to stay healthy and safe.

While GCSE results in 2008 were a bit disappointing, the current Year 11 are on track to get above average results. Students of all ages including the sixth formers make good progress during their time in school. The teaching is good. Most lessons are interesting and relevant. They help you to develop skills such as teamwork and persuasive argument. You are set demanding targets, and you are all working hard to reach and exceed these. You all benefit from the school's humanities status and from the collaboration with other schools and the college. This gives you a wider range of study opportunities, especially in the sixth form.

You have an excellent understanding of spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues. You behave very well and you all get on well with each other and with the staff. When there are problems, the staff help you to sort them out. Those of you who find coming to school difficult are given lots of help. We were impressed by the way you all contribute to the school, such as the sixth formers' organisation of the 'talent contest', and by the way older students help the younger ones.

Much of the school's success is due to the good leadership of the headteacher, other staff and governors. We have asked the school to make sure that you are always clear about the purpose of lessons, and that regular marking always shows you how to improve your work. You can help by politely asking a member of staff if you feel this is not the case.

Wishing you all the best for the future,

Yours faithfully

Paul Sadler

Lead inspector