

St John's Church of England Voluntary Controlled School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	115236
Local Authority	Essex
Inspection number	326157
Inspection dates	17–18 June 2009
Reporting inspector	Mark Phillips HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Voluntary controlled
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	762
Appropriate authority	The local authority
Headteacher	Mr George Yerosimou
Date of previous school inspection	29 June 2006
School address	Tower Road Epping Essex CM16 5EN
Telephone number	01992 573028
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Age group	11–16
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three additional inspectors. The inspection took place at a time when, because of exam leave, school trips and work experience, around half of the student population was absent from school. Nevertheless, inspectors were able to consider a full range of evidence including analysis of data, policy documents and records, the views of parents and students, and 29 lesson observations. Three of these were undertaken jointly with members of the senior leadership team. The headteacher was invited by Her Majesty's Inspector to observe the final team meeting where the final inspection judgements were made.

Description of the school

St John's is smaller than average for a secondary school. It is voluntary-controlled by the Church of England, although all students living within the school's catchment are welcomed, irrespective of their faith. Admission to St John's is governed by the local authority's stated admissions process. The school is situated in the Epping Lindsay and Thornwood Common ward; most students come to the school from this, the North Weald Bassett, or the Epping Hemnall wards. The great majority of students are from White British backgrounds. There are almost no students who do not speak English as their first language. The proportion of students identified as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities is average, although slightly more than average have a statement of special educational needs. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is below average.

St John's has been a specialist engineering college since September 2006. The school was awarded the Artsmark Silver award in 2007, the Intermediate International Schools Award in March 2009, and Healthy Schools Status in April 2009.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

St John's provides a good standard of education. Students are cared for, guided and supported well and the majority make good progress. After the last inspection, when the school was also judged to be good, students' achievements fell and there was a significant turnover of teachers at all levels. However, under the leadership of the new headteacher and his strong leadership team, standards, attendance, and behaviour have all improved. Many stakeholders told inspectors how far the school has moved forward since the last inspection. Standards in Key Stage 4 are below average, as they have been for some years. However, standards in Key Stage 3 are now in line with national expectations. The next challenge for the school is to raise standards even higher by targeting and reaching above-average targets for GCSE, to reflect these students' increased capabilities.

Teaching is good. Planning is thorough and most lessons cater well for different levels of subject knowledge and understanding. Marking and assessment are good. However, there is inconsistency in the amount of attention given in lessons to the specific requirements of those students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities but without a statement of special educational needs. While these students are now better identified, their progress is not as fast as that of others because recent changes in the management of learning support have not yet had enough time to take full effect. The good curriculum is a particular strength of the school. There is good provision for literacy and numeracy, including additional help for those who need it in Key Stage 3. In Years 10 and 11, students are able to choose from a good range of academic and vocational qualifications, and those most at risk from disaffection with school are offered off-site opportunities when appropriate. Specialist status has brought a good range of additional curriculum opportunities; whilst results fell short of the challenging specialist targets in 2008, the benefits of changes in leadership, curriculum and staffing made since the last inspection are being seen clearly in the good progress made by current students, particularly in design technology, where they are clearly on track to achieve well.

Students' personal development is good, overall. They feel safe and secure in school, and they have a good awareness of how to keep healthy. Although some parents raised concerns, the behaviour of the great majority is good. There is still a small group of students that require temporary exclusion when they do not behave appropriately, but this number is below the national average and has reduced considerably in recent years.

While leadership is good, there are some management matters that require attention. There is a good ethos of inclusion and cooperation among staff and students but the school does not meet all of its duties to promote community cohesion and equalities. The impact of this is seen in students' spiritual and cultural development, which is only satisfactory; while the school provides opportunities for students to learn about different beliefs and cultures, their understanding about what it means to live in a diverse society lacks depth and not enough is done to promote or evaluate this work. This is a key area for development, and particularly so given the school's context. Nevertheless, the school's good self-evaluation and the progress made in key areas over the past two years show that the school has good capacity for further improvement.

What the school should do to improve further

- Further raise standards and achievement by setting and reaching above-average targets in Key Stage 4 to reflect the higher capabilities and progress of students currently in Key Stage 3.
- Ensure that the school meets all its duties to promote equalities and community cohesion, including the involvement of stakeholders in shaping, monitoring, and evaluating these strategies, so that students have a deeper understanding of what it means to live in a diverse society.
- Ensure that the specific requirements of all students with learning disabilities and/or difficulties, particularly those without a statement of educational need, are considered by all teachers when planning and managing lessons.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Students who took their GCSEs last year, together with those in the current Years 10 and 11, joined St John's with standards firmly below average. Whilst the 2008 GCSE results were below average, they were closer to the national figures than in previous years, both overall and in English and mathematics. The school's well-founded projections for 2009 indicate further improvement, and the gap between the standards achieved by St John's students and those of students nationally is closing. Standards in Key Stage 3 are now firmly in line with the national average, partly because of the higher standards those students have already attained before they start Year 7 but also because of their good learning in lessons. Standards in religious studies at GCSE are exceptionally high, and students make outstanding progress in this subject. As in 2008, the school is on course to meet the challenging targets set for the overall number of GCSE passes in 2009 and, while targets in the specialist subjects were missed last year, the current Year 11 are on course to achieve much better results, particularly in design technology.

In 2008, boys made better progress than girls, but not significantly so. Those students with statements of special educational needs made much better progress than those at school-level action for their learning difficulties. More consistent management of these students is helping them to make better progress this year, albeit not as quickly as other groups.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Most students enjoy being at school, where they feel safe, secure and well cared for. Racist incidents are rare. Students say that bullying rarely occurs but when it does it is dealt with immediately and effectively. Teachers promote students' sense of self-worth and confidence by commending them on their achievements, followed by further challenges. Students have good awareness of how to eat healthily. Their participation in sport is good, and the work of the physical education department does much to raise many students' self-esteem.

Standards of behaviour both in the classroom and around school are generally good. Attendance rates in all year groups are much improved and are in line with national averages. There has been a significant reduction in the number of temporary exclusions and persistent absences, and this is another reason for students' better progress in their studies. They are making good progress in developing the skills that they need for further education and employment.

Students actively participate in charitable work, and make some good contributions to community life. However, their experience of living in a diverse community through working with people from different backgrounds is less well developed. Similarly, while they are developing good social and moral skills, their spiritual and cultural understanding is only satisfactory. All of these areas require development as part of the school's strategy to promote community cohesion.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

The majority of teaching is good or better. Teachers have good subject and curriculum knowledge. Lessons are planned thoroughly and help the majority of students to make good progress. Good working relationships in class lead to good standards of behaviour. Most students are enthusiastic about their lessons and their learning, which leads to high levels of engagement in most lessons. Homework is set and marked regularly. Learning materials are well produced and appropriate to different levels of students' subject knowledge and understanding. Students are regularly assessed and monitored, and booster or master classes provided for students in need of support or more challenge.

In the less successful lessons, there is more emphasis on teaching rather than learning and the individual needs of some learners are not always reflected in the lesson activities. Ensuring that all teachers understand how to translate their knowledge of students' particular needs into effective learning strategies is a key area for improvement, so that all groups of students can progress at similar rates.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

All statutory requirements are met for the curriculum in Key Stages 3 and 4. In Years 10 and 11 there is a wide choice of subjects and vocational options to meet the needs of the students, including courses in engineering and health and social care. The engineering specialist provision is strong and is reflected across the school curriculum. This includes providing an artist-in-residence to develop students' creative responses to engineering tasks. Information and communication technology has been revitalised across the school and this is reflected in a new syllabus at Key Stage 4, 'Information and Communication Technology for Life'. There is good provision for literacy and numeracy across the curriculum, especially for those students identified as needing extra support. There is a weekly citizenship lesson for every class, although the quality of these lessons is variable, as is the depth of students' understanding about citizenship issues. Able, gifted and talented students are catered for in additional master-classes and activities. There is a reasonable range of enrichment opportunities to match students' interests.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The school meets all requirements for safeguarding students, including robust employment checks and procedures. There are strong and effective partnerships with other agencies to promote students' well-being, including good communication with parents and carers. This can be seen in the improved attendance figures, which have been achieved through effective partnership working and much more robust management processes.

National Curriculum levels are clearly explained to students, both in lessons and by tutors. Year Progress Leaders effectively link pastoral and academic support. The school's systems for tracking students' progress is efficient and reliably informs staff and parents, helping them to identify the students who need further help with their work. A particularly good aspect of this work is the way that parents are encouraged to take part by providing feedback to the school on how well their children are attaining targets.

A new inclusion manager took up post in March 2009. A very useful guide has been produced for teachers, explaining the details of students' specific learning needs. However, less help is given to teachers in developing effective teaching and learning strategies for these students and this is an area for further improvement.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

There is a clear and effective focus on improving standards of students' work and personal development. The headteacher's strong ambition and pride in the school is shared across the school community. The school's reputation in the local community has improved significantly, as seen by the record number of applications for places in the next Year 7. An important reason for the school's good progress is the strength and consistency of senior and middle leaders. This includes a significant number of subject leaders who have taken up post since the last inspection. There is a robust programme of professional development, including very good partnerships with the local authority. There is a good focus on inclusion, and there is a noticeably positive team ethos amongst staff. However, there has been less focus on ensuring that all duties to promote equalities and community cohesion are fulfilled. Governance is satisfactory. The governing body is well-organised and governors are very committed, but they have not ensured that appropriate equalities and community cohesion strategies are fully in place. Similarly, while the school gives good value for money overall because of the good provision and outcomes for students, governors are still having to overcome a budget deficit that was discovered after the last inspection. The school has yet to achieve Financial Management Standards in Schools status.

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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?	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
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	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
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3
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	3
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	2

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?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2

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	2
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	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	2
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3
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**

19 June 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of St John's School, Epping, CM16 5EN

I am writing to let you know the results of our recent inspection visit. Although a good number of you were busy with work experience or taking part in school trips, we were able to talk with many of you who were in school, look at your books and coursework, and examine your teachers' assessments to see how well you are doing. I would like to thank those students that we met during our inspection for the welcome that you gave us, which was much appreciated.

We judged that St John's remains a good school. There was a dip in exam results after the last inspection, with a number of staff changes. However, the school has recovered well and there are clear signs that good progress is being made in some key areas. Standards are rising, and those of you in Key Stage 3 are now working in line with national expectations. This means, of course, that even greater things should be expected of you so I have asked the school to make sure that you have above-average targets to aim for when you take your GCSEs. We were delighted to see that your attendance has improved considerably, and I would like to thank you and your parents for working so effectively with the school to achieve this. Similarly, far fewer of you are being excluded from school for inappropriate behaviour; well done for that, too. You have a good curriculum, and you are taught well. Your teachers try to encourage everyone's progress, whatever level they are working at in that particular subject. We do think, however, that even more could be done in lessons to support those of you with specific learning needs and we have asked the school to consider this as an area for further improvement.

There is one final task that I have set the school. While we are sure that everyone is treated fairly, the school needs to make absolutely certain that everyone is valued and given an equal chance, whatever their background, by having clear plans that can be monitored and reported on every year. There are some particular duties that the school is not completely fulfilling, and this includes involving a range of people across and beyond the school community. This is a marvellous opportunity for students and parents to participate in the wider life of the school and, if you are asked, I hope that you will contribute enthusiastically.

Thank you once again to those of you who helped us with our inspection and, to all of you, very best wishes for your future studies and career plans.

Mark Phillips

Her Majesty's Inspector