

Blessed William Howard Catholic School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	124455
Local Authority	Staffordshire
Inspection number	328145
Inspection dates	25–26 March 2009
Reporting inspector	Mary Davis

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)	1018
Sixth form	141
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Gerald O'Hara
Headteacher	Phil Smith
Date of previous school inspection	1 March 2006
School address	Rowley Avenue Stafford ST17 9AB
Telephone number	01785 244236
Fax number	01785 225342

Age group	11–18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Blessed William Howard is an average sized secondary school in Stafford. It serves the Catholic community in a wide geographical area in the archdiocese of Birmingham. The majority of pupils are from White British backgrounds. The proportion of students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below the national average. However, the proportion of students who have statements of special educational needs is above average. The school was re-designated a specialist arts college in 2006. Post-16 provision is supported by a consortium with other Stafford schools and colleges.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 4

In accordance with section 13 (3) of the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that this school requires significant improvement, because it is performing significantly less well than in all the circumstances it could be reasonably be expected to perform. The school is therefore given a Notice to Improve. Significant improvement is required in relation to the progress made by students.

Students enter the school having attained results above the average in national tests. By Year 11 standards are broadly average. Students' achievement has been significantly below the national average since the last inspection and in 2008 declined further. Progress is particularly poor in English and standards are significantly weaker than in other core subjects. This is due in part to long term staff absences in the department.

The school's assessment information is often unreliable and only reviewed once a term. As a result senior leaders fail to identify underachievement soon enough. In addition, they do not set sufficiently challenging targets nor take effective action to ensure students meet the targets. This also means that students go for long periods with insufficient understanding of the extent to which they are making progress, or what they need to do to improve. Students in the sixth form study at school and through a collegiate of local providers, and this close partnership keeps them informed about their progress through regular feedback. Sixth form standards are average and overall progress is satisfactory.

The quality of teaching is satisfactory and has improved in recent times due to the support and training provided for staff. However, the improvements made have not yet fully impacted upon improving students' progress and the standards they reach. Many of the lessons seen during the inspection were good and some were outstanding. However students and parents confirm inspection observations that this is not consistent across all subjects. Often the level of challenge in lessons is not high enough. This is because teachers do not make sufficient use of assessment information to tailor their lesson plans to match students' needs, especially in some English lessons. As a result, students do not always progress as well as they should.

Students' personal development and well-being are satisfactory. Although some parents expressed concern about poor behaviour, students behaved well during the inspection and were welcoming and polite to inspectors. Students work well with each other and older students support younger ones. Their understanding of how to stay healthy is satisfactory, but students are concerned that this is not promoted sufficiently and rightly identify that they do not receive adequate sex education. There is a school council but many students are unaware of its work and feel that they do not have a voice within the school. Students say that they enjoy school, particularly when lessons are demanding and they appreciate the range of activities offered as a result of the arts college specialism.

The pastoral care provided for students is good. Students value being able to talk to their pastoral tutors and feel there is always someone to talk to should they have a problem. Students feel safe, and vulnerable students are well supported. Attendance is satisfactory and the number of persistent absentees is reducing due to effective measures instigated by the school. Parents are kept well informed about all school activities. There are good examples of academic guidance being given to support students, particularly in mathematics and science. However this is not consistently the case across subjects and within departments. The form tutor's role in providing regular support for students' progress is underdeveloped. In some subjects suitable intervention

strategies are in place to address underachievement. However, the effectiveness of the intervention is unclear as the school is only able to provide limited information on its impact.

The curriculum is satisfactory and improving. At Key Stage 3, an innovative development has been the introduction of a Year 7 course offering opportunities for creativity and exploring the wider world. This bridges the gap between primary and secondary school and enables students to develop good learning skills. This is a good quality course that helps students become confident learners and is highly rated by both parents and students. At Key Stage 4 there are four pathways to suit students' needs and aspirations. The school's arts specialist status enables a wider choice of options to be available and opportunities for additional study are provided in twilight sessions. There is currently insufficient provision for citizenship in Key Stage 3.

The headteacher, supported by his senior team, has provided clarity of purpose and direction and is deeply committed to securing quality in every aspect of the school's work. He works closely with the senior team to ensure that all middle leaders and teachers take responsibility for raising standards and achievement. Although the school's effectiveness is not as good as at the time of the last inspection, strategies introduced in recent times to improve the quality of teaching and students' behaviour have been effective. However these strategies have not had sufficient time to fully impact on raising standards.

The school promotes community cohesion satisfactorily by providing opportunities for students to develop relationships and gain an awareness of people from different ethnic backgrounds. The Catholic ethos of the school is evident, particularly in the use of form tutor time for worship and spiritual reflection, and underpins its inclusive outlook and commitment to equal opportunities. The leadership team is well supported and challenged by the governing body, which has successfully introduced an expectation of accountability throughout the school. This, along with recent improvements, means the school has a satisfactory capacity to improve.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Students in the sixth form enjoy and benefit from the good range of courses provided by the school in partnership with schools in the collegiate. However the sixth form centre and private study facilities are poorly resourced. Students' personal development and well-being are good. They enjoy their courses and make a good contribution to the life of the school, particularly in their support of younger students. They say, however, that their health education is lacking. The quality of teaching is satisfactory. Some of the teaching observed was outstanding and exemplified the good learning atmosphere within the sixth form, a view supported by the students. The best lessons effectively promoted students' independent learning skills and high levels of engagement. In these sessions learning progressed rapidly with a strong level of challenge, promoting interest and enjoyment. However, in some less effective lessons, teachers provided too few opportunities for the students to participate actively through, for example, discussion work. Care, guidance and support are satisfactory. Students value the guidance they receive about their choice of courses and the help they are given to make career decisions. As a result, the majority of students complete their two year courses and move on to higher education. Students say that their subject teachers give them good advice on how to improve their work, but form tutors are less effective in providing consistent support. The satisfactory leadership ensures that progress is generally monitored well and has a clear understanding of what needs to be done to improve performance.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards and increase rates of progress, especially in English, by ensuring that senior leaders improve the accuracy and use of assessment information to set challenging targets and eliminate underachievement more rapidly.
- Ensure that students are frequently informed about the progress they are making, so that they have a better understanding about how they can improve their work and reach their targets.
- Ensure all teachers make full use of assessment information to inform their lesson planning so that students' work is matched precisely to their different learning needs.
- Improve the provision for health education and citizenship.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 4

Students join the school having reached above average standards in the national tests in English, mathematics and science in their previous schools. Results at this entry point also indicate that there is an above average proportion of higher attaining students. Standards across the school vary. By the end of Year 9 they are still above the national average in all three subjects, although in 2008 fewer girls than boys met their target grades. While the school's leadership has recognised the underachievement of girls, they are unable to explain the reasons for this and there has been no analysis of the current performance of girls and boys. Recent teachers' assessments indicate that the current Year 9 students are unlikely to meet their targets. GCSE results over the last three years show a declining picture. Standards in English fell to significantly below the national average in 2008, but have been consistently above average in mathematics. Students' rates of progress from Key Stage 2 to 4 are significantly below average and in the bottom 10% nationally. Poor progress in English has contributed to the declining picture of achievement. The leadership of the English department has introduced a variety of strategies to address this, including the introduction of a new syllabus for the current Year 11 students, which is more effectively engaging their interest. The school's performance tracking and assessment procedures are not robust enough across all subjects to give an accurate picture of current achievement and standards. In the sixth form standards are average with students making sound progress. However, students do not do as well in English language and geography as they do in other subjects. There is no significant difference between the performances of different ethnic groups. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities progress as well as their peers.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory. This is supported effectively by cultural events held by the school during the year. Students have a sound awareness and appreciation of other cultures and are actively involved in daily worship. They generally have good social skills that enable them to interact well with others. Most students understand how to stay healthy but many do not take up the healthy eating choices offered by the school. They enjoy physical education (PE) and say they would appreciate more opportunities to participate in physical activities. Students feel safe and supported and they know how to manage risks and keep themselves safe in and outside school. They feel confident that bullying is effectively managed by the school. Most students enjoy school especially in lessons where teaching is good or better. Students' views were appropriately represented by

one who commented, 'Most of us enjoy school when we feel challenged but some teachers don't challenge us as much as others.' Behaviour is mostly well managed and the recently introduced 'behaviour for learning' strategy is well regarded by students and parents. Students make a satisfactory contribution to their school, local and wider communities, for example through the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. The opportunities for students to fully engage in the running of the school are limited and they feel that the school does not always do as much as it could to ensure their day-to-day comfort, for example by providing soap in the toilets and ensuring these facilities are always kept in good working order. Students express their personal opinions and ideas confidently, both in and out of their lessons. These personal skills, in addition to key skills, including in information and communication technology (ICT), satisfactorily prepare them for their future economic well-being.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

The school's focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning is informed by secure lesson observation and self-evaluation. Outcomes of this are supported by the sharing of good practice and a targeted programme of professional development. The school's monitoring information shows that as a result of these evaluation and support mechanisms, the number of inadequate lessons is rapidly declining. In the best lessons teachers engaged, inspired and challenged students. Typically there was an emphasis on active learning with varied activities that capture and sustain interest. Students enjoyed these lessons, took pride in their work, and were confident to participate fully in group work or undertake independent research. However, in too many lessons, the teachers did not make enough use of assessment information to plan work that precisely matched students' needs. As a result, students did not progress as rapidly as they could do. Also, teachers do not always give enough chances for students to actively engage in the lessons, through, for example, discussion work. Most teachers have good subject knowledge. Relationships between teachers and students are positive and most lessons take place in a calm and productive atmosphere. Teachers do not always provide students with enough information through marking to let them know what they need to do to improve.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The specialist college provision enhances the curriculum provision well through the provision of drama and dance lessons in Years 7–11. The school has effective programmes to promote modern foreign languages work in Years 10 and 11 by providing twilight sessions. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are supported to help improve their skills in literacy and numeracy. Provision for ICT has improved since the last inspection as shown by the improving results and progress of students in this subject. There are, however, some gaps in the curriculum. Provision for PE and citizenship in Years 8 and 9 is not as effective as it is in other year groups, although there are plans to address this in the next academic year. Aspects of health education are underdeveloped across the school. There are many opportunities for enrichment, linked to the school's arts college specialist status. For example, many students enjoy participating in the choir, orchestra and dance activities. The strong enrichment is further exemplified by the large number of students who involve themselves in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme and in sporting activities.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

The school has a caring ethos. Safeguarding procedures are robust and students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive satisfactory support so that they make the same progress as many of their peers. The inclusion room has recently been introduced to enable disaffected students to achieve better, providing an effective extra level of support for those in danger of being excluded. This has resulted in reduced disruption to lessons. Vulnerable students are well supported by mentors and a variety of outside agencies, and non-teaching pastoral tutors are available throughout the school day to support students who require it. As a result students feel there is always someone they can talk to. Students value the careers guidance they receive through Connexions and are well guided when making choices about their next steps. Form tutor time is well used to provide personal and spiritual guidance, but opportunities are being missed to involve tutors fully in monitoring and guiding students' academic progress. The school has sound procedures to identify students who are 'gifted and talented'. However, these students are not always given sufficient support to accelerate their achievement.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The senior leadership team is promoting an ethos of teamwork and collaboration amongst staff and, through delegating responsibility, is successfully encouraging a whole school commitment to continuous improvement. Where improvement is evident, such as in students' behaviour, this is the result of ensuring that agreed procedures are used consistently. An improved systematic approach to self-evaluation means that the school knows itself well, and the school improvement plan focuses appropriately on academic excellence, behaviour for learning and community development. However, the school has rightly recognised the need to improve the quality of assessment information and use it more regularly to set challenging targets, inform students what they need to do to improve and eliminate underachievement more rapidly. The self-evaluation of some departments fails to be sufficiently rigorous and challenging in its analysis of the impact of action plans. Targeted support for underachieving departments is in place, and this has successfully led to improvements, for example in ICT. However, there is more to be done to secure consistently good provision by all departments across the school. The recently established curriculum reviews help towards this. Most middle managers have embraced change and they now have a better understanding of their role in supporting whole-school self-evaluation and improvement. Governors take an active interest in the life of the school and are fully involved in promoting positive outcomes.

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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?	4	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?	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	4	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	4	4
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	4	

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?	3	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	3	
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	3	
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?	3	3

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	4	
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	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?	Yes	

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

27 March 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Blessed William Howard Catholic School, Stafford ST17 9AB

My colleagues and I enjoyed our visit to your school. We were particularly impressed by your mature comments identifying how your school can improve. We agree with what you say, and because your progress is not fast enough, we have given the school a Notice to Improve. This means that other inspectors will visit your school again in the coming months, to check how well the headteacher and all staff are doing in making improvements. These are our main findings.

- Standards by the end of Year 11 and in the sixth form are broadly average, but by the time you reach Year 11 you have not made sufficient progress, particularly in English.
- We do not think that the school tracks your progress frequently enough, so you go for too long without knowing how well you are doing. This results in you being unable to take enough responsibility for your own progress.
- You enjoy school, particularly when lessons are demanding, and your attendance and behaviour in lessons are improving. However you feel that you do not have a sufficient voice in the running of the school. We particularly noted your comments about toilets and agree that they are not always kept in good working order.
- The teaching you receive is satisfactory and improving but tasks in lessons are not always matched closely enough to your needs. You do not always get the information you need to know how to improve your work.
- The curriculum that you follow is satisfactory and there is a good range of extra-curricular activities, but we agree with you that there is not enough emphasis on health education and citizenship.
- The good care you receive enables you to feel safe and well supported.
- The school's leadership is working satisfactorily to ensure that things improve in the future.

All of the above applies to the sixth form as well as the main school. In order to take your learning to new heights, we have asked the school to ensure they frequently monitor your progress and inform you how well you are doing and that teachers challenge you effectively according to your individual ability. We have asked them to raise standards and achievement in English and to improve the provision for health education and citizenship. You can help by always working hard to achieve your targets.

Yours faithfully

Mrs Mary Davis Lead inspector