

Virgo Fidelis Convent Senior School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	131280
Local Authority	Croydon
Inspection number	328575
Inspection dates	1–2 April 2009
Reporting inspector	Angela Corbett HMI

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	Girls
Number on roll	
School (total)	864
Sixth form	298
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr John Finnin
Headteacher	Sister Bernadette
Date of previous school inspection	9 May 2006
School address	147 Central Hill Upper Norwood London SE19 1RS
Telephone number	020 8670 6917
Fax number	020 8761 4455

Age group	11–19
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Virgo Fidelis Convent Senior School is smaller than average. Students are drawn from the northern part of Croydon and several other neighbouring boroughs. Most students are baptised Roman Catholics and practising members of the Church. In the sixth form there is an ecumenical grouping with strong Muslim representation. About three quarters of the students are from minority ethnic groups. The largest of these groups is Black African but almost all other ethnic groups are represented in the remainder of the school population. The proportion of students learning English as an additional language is well above the national average; very few are in the early stages. Fewer students than usual have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. These are mostly in the areas of specific learning (dyslexia) and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

There are around 300 students in the sixth form, although about one third of these receive their education at Thomas More Catholic School, for whom the school acts as a franchise. The quality of education for these students is not included in this report.

The school has been a mathematics and computing specialist college since 2002.

There is also independently managed provision in the St Mary's Family Centre, which is located on the school site, for breakfast and after school clubs and a day nursery.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Virgo Fidelis is a good and improving school, which is underpinned by the values of the Catholic faith and the provision of inclusive educational opportunities for the school's diverse students. Students are keen to learn and they understand the importance of education. They make good progress and get on well together in this caring and harmonious environment. The school's specialism has had a positive impact on the curriculum, broadening the range of courses on offer, increasing information and communication technology (ICT) provision and developing its use across the school. A new building has recently opened providing high-quality learning environments for vocational subjects, such as hair and beauty, ICT, media studies and hospitality and catering.

Students' attainment on entry is now broadly average. Students who took their GCSE examinations in 2008 made better progress at Key Stage 4 than they had at Key Stage 3. The majority achieved challenging targets, with the proportion of students gaining five or more A* to C grades with English and mathematics remaining above the national average. This represents a rise in achievement because starting points for this cohort were lower. Much improved systems for tracking and monitoring students' progress enable staff at all levels to identify underachievement and provide effective support. However, while there is a good understanding of individual attainment and progress, leaders are not always so clear about the bigger picture and their overall analysis of performance is not fully developed.

Teaching and learning are good overall. However, progress slows and students are less engaged when lessons are too teacher-led and there are insufficient opportunities for active learning in, for example, whole-class or pair discussions. The existing good practice, while shared within some departments, is not systematically developed across the school to improve the quality and consistency of teaching. The good curriculum is adapted well to students' needs, particularly in terms of the balance between academic and vocational learning and pathways for progression into the sixth form.

Students' personal development and well-being are good. Most students behave and engage well in lessons. They are well supported by effective pastoral teams who provide good quality care and guidance. Attendance is good. Students have a good knowledge of how to be healthy and how to stay safe. They have good opportunities to take on responsibilities and make a contribution to school life, for example as peer mentors or dance council members. While there are school and year councils, their involvement in decision-making is limited and students across the school expressed concerns that their views were not always taken into account.

The headteacher's good leadership provides clear vision. She is well supported by the senior leadership team and a committed staff. They all share her strong focus on student achievement and personal development. Systems to monitor and evaluate the school's work have improved since the last inspection, particularly at middle manager level. However, self-evaluation is not always sufficiently rigorous, particularly in relation to improving teaching and learning and in evaluating the impact of new initiatives. Few parents replied to the inspection parental questionnaire. A minority were fully supportive of the school, and most indicated that their daughters enjoyed school and felt safe and well cared for. However, the majority of those who responded raised a variety of concerns. Most notably, these were about the school's communication with home and students and the fact that the school did not take sufficient

account of parents' and students' views. Some students spoken to during the inspection supported this view, and inspectors agreed.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Students are from a wide variety of backgrounds and traditions and form a harmonious community. They appreciate the more adult atmosphere that prevails in the sixth form and develop into mature, articulate, sensible and self-confident young women. Attainment on entry is below average because some of the school's Year 11 students do not continue into this sixth form and a high proportion join from other schools. Students make good progress and some, including some for whom English is an additional language, make outstanding progress owing to the high level of personal support they receive. An extremely wide range of academic and vocational courses effectively meets students' diverse needs and interests. In particular, students are enabled to make the transition through different levels at a pace that suits them as individuals. Teaching and learning are good overall. However, there is some variation in the level of challenge and in opportunities for group and pair work.

Students enjoy school and their attendance is good. They participate in a good range of out-of-school activities, although this is not sufficiently monitored to ensure that the needs of all are met. Students make a good contribution to the school and wider community through, for example, their work in helping younger students. However, they do not always feel listened to or informed about activities in the main part of the school, and they do not feel that their concerns are acted upon. Students are prepared well for higher education, further training or employment.

All students are well supported and those new to the school are helped to settle in quickly. They know and understand their individual targets, are well informed about their progress, and have good opportunities to discuss this with their tutors. Sixth form leaders are strongly committed to students' welfare, and strive to ensure that they achieve as well as they can. However, they are not always effective in analysing overall performance or in ensuring that good practice is widely disseminated.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the progress made by all students by giving them more opportunities to participate actively in their learning through sharing existing good practice more systematically across the school.
- In order to raise standards further, bring more rigour to the monitoring and evaluation of the school's work.
- Take more account of students' and parents' or carers' views, and improve communication both between home and school, and with students.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

At the end of Key Stage 3 in 2008, school data show that students' attainment was above the national average. While similar to attainment in 2007, this represented better progress because students' starting points were lower. Attainment at the higher levels is just below the national average in all subjects. However, this improved in English in 2008, and in science the more able Year 9 students gained high grades in a GCSE core module.

In 2008 at Key Stage 4, the proportion of students gaining 5 A* to C grades at GCSE overall was well above the national average. This rise to above the 2006 level followed a dip in performance in 2007. Good performance in the specialist subjects of mathematics and ICT contributed to this increase where most targets were met or exceeded. The proportion of students achieving a GCSE in a modern foreign language was also well above average. Overall, progress is consistently good for the majority of students. However, there is some variation between subjects, in particular in option subjects where cohorts are smaller, for example in history, physical education and art. In 2008, the proportion of students achieving at the higher grades was below national averages. However, current data indicate that the majority of students are on track to achieve their challenging targets in 2009, particularly at the higher grade levels.

Students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those who have specific learning (dyslexia) and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, also make good progress. For a few, progress is outstanding because of awareness of their needs and the extra help and resources provided, in particular within student services.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students' good personal development is linked to the culture and ethos of the school. Many students remark on the strong sense of community in the school and the supportive relationships between students. Most students enjoy being at the school and attendance is good. However, some students feel that school rules are on some occasions over-imposed and that their concerns or suggestions are not always sufficiently taken into account. Students' attitudes to work are generally positive and behaviour during lessons and around school is good overall. In a few lessons, however, chatting and ignoring teachers' instructions slows progress.

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. The citizenship and religious education courses promote moral and social responsibility, and effectively develop students' ability to discern cultural understanding. The school is devoted to developing the students' spiritual welfare. Students are encouraged to actively engage in working with others, both in the school and its wider community, for example by supporting St Mary's Family Centre. Students understand the importance of healthy eating and participate well in the many sporting and dance activities. Students state that they are safe and well cared for, and that rare instances of bullying are effectively dealt with. There have been no recent racist incidents.

Students are well prepared for future economic well-being as a result of their good basic and work-related skills and understanding of the world of work. For example, a sizeable number of students at Key Stage 4 have recently gained the British Safety Council's Entry Level 3 Award in Workplace Hazard Awareness; this now forms part of the work-related learning curriculum in Years 9, 10 and 11.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

The quality of teaching and learning has improved since the last inspection. In the majority of lessons, students enjoy their work and make consistently good progress. These are lessons where teachers provide good opportunities for students to engage actively in learning, for example through student presentations, group and paired work and questioning. Good use of

ICT also enhances learning in many lessons. However, in a minority of lessons, students do not have enough opportunities to engage actively in their learning and they become passive or spend too long listening to the teacher. As a result, students' progress slows and they do not enjoy their work as much.

Students' positive attitudes towards education are reflected in their approach to homework, with older students sometimes devoting many hours to it, contributing to their good progress and achievement. However, some students feel that homework and coursework could be better planned and managed.

In most subjects, students know how well they are doing and they receive comments on their work to help them improve. However, the quality of these comments is variable. The best are detailed and specific, while others are still too general in nature. Recently developed peer and self-assessment methods in some subject areas, such as English, childcare and dance, are particularly helpful to students.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

In Key Stage 4, the vocational side of the curriculum is developed well, with courses in childcare, hospitality, health and social care. At the same time students have a good range of options, including science and ICT. At Key stage 3, in Year 7, students who need extra help with mathematics and English receive additional lessons, while those capable of making faster progress are able to make a start on GCSE work during Year 9. For example, they successfully take a GCSE science module test. In mathematics, students have access to a wider range of courses in the sixth form, including further mathematics and finance and accounting. These courses are also made available to the wider community.

The good curriculum impacts very positively on student achievement. However, the full potential of some of the most recent changes – for instance alternative courses in science and ICT and new courses such as childcare – has yet to be realised. At both key stages, subjects that are taught to most students in each year group, such as mathematics, are taught in mixed-ability classes. Although some students commented that this was not always helpful, inspection evidence did not substantiate this.

There is a good range of very popular extra-curricular activities, including dance, sports and music. Special events, trips and visits also enhance students' experiences and learning. For example, the two-day project on 'women in the workplace' provided a good opportunity to develop more independent styles of learning. Retreats and Masses provide students with opportunities for spiritual reflection. Large TV screens remind students and visitors of the lively school productions which celebrate music and dance from a range of heritages; they also provide insight into current affairs and information about school life.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The pastoral aspects of care and support are strengths of the school. The ways in which the school identifies students who may be vulnerable or at risk are thorough. Students in need are effectively supported by pastoral leaders. There is good liaison with outside medical and social support agencies, including the local authority.

Guidance for students receiving additional learning support is good. Their targets are reviewed regularly and adjusted in accordance with their progress and this contributes to the good progress they make.

Students' academic progress is assessed accurately and tracked well. Almost all students know their targets, receive guidance in the next steps of their learning and are well prepared for examination entry. However, written feedback is variable in quality and some comments do not provide sufficient detail to effectively guide students to the next level. Some students feel that they would like more opportunities to discuss their progress towards targets with their teachers.

Students are given good advice and guidance on careers and their subject and course options as they move through the school.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Since the last inspection, there has been a focus on raising achievement. The improved quality and use of data by senior and middle leaders is ensuring that most students reach challenging targets. The school's leaders are highly effective in promoting the personal development and well-being of all students, through varied opportunities and experiences. The school works with a wide range of partners to provide support and enhance provision. This emphasis on equality of opportunity has led to harmony and tolerance across the school and reflects the school's active approach to promoting good community cohesion. Higher expectations have been set for middle leaders and their contribution to and accountability for school improvement. As a result, capacity for further improvement is now good. However, while middle leaders are now participating in self-evaluation and school development planning, this lacks depth and consistency, particularly in relation to individual initiatives or actions. Teaching and learning are monitored through lesson observations at both department and school level. However, the school's judgements of outstanding practice are over-estimated. Information is used well to help individual teachers to improve their practice but, at a whole-school level, the strategic approach to identifying and developing aspects of teaching not fully developed.

Governors take a keen interest in the work of the school. They meet their statutory requirements, are knowledgeable, and use their expertise to effectively support the school and act as critical friends. They do not always, however, provide sufficient challenge in relation to student achievement.

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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?	2	2
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?	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?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	1
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	2	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	3
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	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 April 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Virgo Fidelis Convent Senior School, London, SE19 1RS

On behalf of your inspection team, I would like to let you know that we enjoyed the time we spent with you, on our recent visit. We would like to thank you for making us feel so welcome and for sharing your views with us in meetings, lessons and around the school. Virgo Fidelis is providing you with a good education and is working to improve further.

We hope that you will take the time to read the full report but I have highlighted the key points below.

- The standards you achieve by the end of Year 11 are above the national average, although in the sixth form they are average.
- Teaching and learning are good and you make good progress in most lessons. However, we agree that you would benefit from more opportunities to be actively involved in your learning in some lessons.
- For some of you in the sixth form, your progress is outstanding because of the additional support you receive.
- You are keen to learn and want to do well. Your attendance is good.
- You benefit from the good curriculum in Years 7 to 11, and in the sixth form it is even better in terms of meeting your individual needs and interests.
- Your behaviour overall is good, although a few of you disrupt learning in a small minority of your lessons.
- You get on well with each other and many of you commented on the strong sense of community in the school.
- You know your targets and good systems are in place to track your progress.
- You participate in a wide range of events, including raising money for charity, and after school activities, particularly those linked with sport, music and dance.

To improve things further, we have asked the school to.

- Improve the progress you make by giving you more opportunities to participate actively in your learning through sharing the existing good teaching practices.
- In order to raise your standards further, improve the monitoring and evaluation of the school's work.
- Take more account of yours and your parents' or carers' views, and improve communication both between home and school, and with yourselves.

You can help by continuing to attend well, being actively involved in your learning and making the most of the opportunities offered both in and out of lessons.

Yours faithfully

Angela Corbett

Her Majesty's Inspector