

St Ambrose College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	131315
Local Authority	Trafford
Inspection number	328581
Inspection dates	8–9 July 2009
Reporting inspector	Sue Harrison HMI

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	Boys
Number on roll	
School (total)	909
Sixth form	197
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Robin Haig
Headteacher	Mr M Thompson
Date of previous school inspection	23 November 2005
School address	Wicker Lane Hale Barns Altrincham Cheshire WA15 0HE
Telephone number	0161 980 2711
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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

St Ambrose is a Catholic boys' grammar school which is situated in an affluent area, however, most students come from outside the local area. They come from a range of backgrounds, although the entitlement to free school meals is low. Students are selected on the basis of an entrance examination. While the proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is increasing, it is still well below the national average. Very few students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The school gained specialist status in mathematics and computing in 2005.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

St Ambrose has made significant improvements to teaching and learning since the last inspection and is now an outstanding school. The standard of students' work is high and they make excellent progress in many subjects. Progress in mathematics has not been as good, but steps to address this are having a very positive impact in the current year.

The school's ethos is based on the 'Eight Essentials of the Christian Brother Education'. Inspectors found a culture of respect and concern for others that pervades all aspects of the work of the school. St Ambrose places high importance on social education, as well as academic, and the boys' personal development is outstanding. The majority thoroughly enjoy coming to school, they behave well and make an excellent contribution to the wider community as well as within the school. They are developing a wide range of skills to prepare them for life after school.

Teaching and learning have been transformed since the last inspection. There is a much greater emphasis on developing the boys' understanding and involvement in their learning. Most lessons are planned meticulously to achieve this and students respond with enthusiasm. Two aspects of the teaching and learning are particularly worthy of note: the high level of challenge to students and the excellent use of information and communication technology (ICT) in many lessons. There are still a few lessons that are satisfactory, but do not encourage boys to progress sufficiently.

The school has also improved the curriculum since the last inspection. Great care and thought have gone into restructuring the curriculum to ensure it stretches the most able, stimulates a genuine interest in subjects and provides excellent enrichment opportunities to develop the talents of all the boys.

Leadership and management are outstanding. Training for leadership takes a high priority at all levels across the school. Faculty leaders take clear responsibility for their areas and self-assessment is rigorous and effective. The school's specialism has been very well managed to lead improvements in teaching and learning and subject management. Most parents are extremely positive about the school and a number used the term 'outstanding' in describing their views. Accommodation is dated and plans are in place for a new school building.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

Students' achievement in the sixth form is outstanding. In 2008, there was a 100% pass rate in General Certificate of Education (GCE) A levels and a high proportion of students gained grades A or B in their subjects. This represents excellent progress. Students thoroughly enjoy their time in the sixth form and retention is high. They benefit from teaching that is at least good and often outstanding, and a curriculum that has been developed well to meet their needs. As well as extending the range of GCE A-level courses on offer in recent years, the school has introduced Open University modules aimed at helping the boys to prepare for higher education. In addition, boys can now enhance their A levels by taking the baccalaureate developed by a national awarding body. This enables students to broaden their studies and undertake detailed research work. The formal curriculum is enhanced by an impressive amount of extra activities. The boys speak enthusiastically about the wide range of visits and trips they undertake in this country and abroad, the sporting events they participate in and a host of

other activities, such as debating clubs and environmental projects. They make a significant contribution to the life of the school and the wider community. Guidance and support are outstanding. Boys receive a lot of help to ensure they make appropriate subject choices. They also benefit from very good support with higher education applications and over 90% take up places at university when they leave. The school is very good at focusing on wider attributes and skills, as well as academic qualifications, and the boys' personal development is outstanding. The sixth form is very well led and managed and it has expanded its intake considerably in recent years.

What the school should do to improve further

- Embed the best practice in teaching and learning across all lessons to ensure boys reach their full potential in every subject.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Students enter the school with standards that are well above average, though the intake is much broader than that of most grammar schools. Standards remain significantly above average through Key Stages 3 and 4. In 2008, 90% of students gained A* to C grades in five or more subjects at GCSE, including English and mathematics. Students gain A* or A grades in many subjects. Since the last inspection strategies to raise achievement at Key Stage 3 have had a positive impact and more students are attaining the higher levels of which they are capable. Similarly, the rate of progress made by students during Key Stage 4 has increased and is outstanding in many subjects. At Key Stage 4 there has been an improving trend over the last three years except for performance in mathematics. The school identified reasons for this and restructured the mathematics provision with positive outcomes this year. Inspectors observed students making good progress in mathematics lessons and school data for 2008/09 show increased proportions of Year 11 students gaining the highest grades based on results already obtained in modular examinations. The school has few students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. They, too, make outstanding progress and achieve as well as other students.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. The school has a positive, caring ethos which fosters respect for others. The boys develop a rich understanding of other faiths and communities, and a sense of social justice, through a range of activities, such as voluntary work with vulnerable groups in local communities and extensive fundraising. They show a deep level of interest in global issues, such as world poverty, which is fostered by the school's links with a community in Sierra Leone. The overwhelming majority of students thoroughly enjoy coming to school and this is reflected in the attendance figures, which are consistently well above the national average. Students make the most of opportunities to take on additional responsibilities within the school and through external work, for example with local primary schools. Such involvement promotes communication and leadership skills extremely well. Boys gain a wide range of transferable skills throughout their time at the school and they further develop their understanding of the skills required by employers via extensive work experience undertaken in Year 11.

Students show an excellent understanding of how to stay safe and healthy. This is helped by their involvement in the development of school policies, such as safe use of the internet. Their

awareness of healthy lifestyles is enhanced by topics covered in subjects such as science, and within tutorials. There is a high level of participation in sports and good uptake of healthy eating options.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

The quality of teaching and learning is outstanding as a result of the very high level of challenge in most lessons and a brisk pace, to which the students respond well. Classroom relationships are generally excellent with an atmosphere of mutual respect between students and teachers contributing to very positive attitudes to learning. Teachers have secure subject knowledge and their enthusiasm for their subject inspires the students. The great majority of lessons are well planned with activities that stimulate interest, motivate and challenge students leading to excellent achievement. The use of ICT to support learning is excellent. For example, the use of a thrilling film clip in a Year 10 physics lesson captivated the students' attention; they used the speed of a tense motor bike chase to record results followed by a challenging analysis. Students are given the opportunity to think for themselves and develop their own ideas. For example, Year 12 technology students showed excellent analytical skills of product design with constructive ideas for improvement. The school has developed a number of strategies to improve the quality of lessons which has encouraged a much more positive approach to the sharing of good practice since the last inspection. However, in a minority of lessons, learning is directed too much by teachers, activities do not engage or motivate and a small number of students misbehave. In some of these lessons, the teacher provides the extension to students' answers themselves rather than giving opportunity for them to be fully involved in the lesson.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The school has made very effective use of the flexibility the new National Curriculum offers and consulted with parents and students to arrive at an outstanding curriculum experience for its students. Through careful mapping of student experiences, the Key Stage 3 curriculum is now designed to be delivered in two years. To support this, a comprehensive three week induction programme is in place for Year 7 students. Through it, students undertake a 'learning to learn' experience that prepares them well for their secondary school studies. Included in the induction programme is a two day residential retreat to help the boys get to know their new classmates and teachers and to develop their understanding of the ethos and principles that underpin the school.

Further developments at Key Stage 4 are having the desired effect of securing a greater number of A* and A grades. The new pathways that have been introduced offer students the choice of following courses that can result in between 9 and 11 GCSEs. Some early entry arrangements are in place and are well used to allow students to further their understanding and enjoyment of subjects rather than gain more GCSEs. The pathways arrangement includes an option to stretch the most gifted and talented and all boys benefit from excellent preparation for A-level work. A comprehensive personal, social, health and citizenship programme delivered through tutor time and religious education lessons, alongside an extensive enrichment programme, contribute extremely well to the personal development of students. The impact of the school's

specialism, for example, the excellent use of ICT across the whole school, is a significant strength of the curriculum.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

The school's caring and supportive philosophy is evident in all its activities. Staff know the students extremely well and the culture of support and encouragement, which underpins the school ethos, contributes significantly to students' excellent progress, enjoyment and well-being and helps to explain why the school is effective and successful. Students say they feel well looked after. The school has undertaken much work in recent years to ensure the boys understand that even minor occurrences, such as rough play, will not be tolerated and the policy is enforced vigorously on the rare occasions when it is necessary. The school provides separate play areas for younger students. Inspectors saw good behaviour in lessons and around the school.

Excellent induction arrangements mean that students new to the school, who come from a large number of primary schools, quickly settle in and feel safe and well cared for. As well as sixth form students providing mentoring roles, boys in Year 8 help the new students to become familiar with the school.

Monitoring of students' academic and personal progress is first-rate resulting in early diagnosis of any problems and effective interventions introduced at appropriate times. Students know their targets and how well they are doing.

The school very successfully promotes equality by meeting the needs of all learners. A small and increasing number of students require additional learning support and the school links with appropriate external agencies as well as providing its own specialist expertise, for example to help students with dyslexia. Procedures in place for safeguarding, including child protection and health and safety measures, meet current requirements.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Leadership and management are outstanding. The headteacher is effectively supported by a very competent extended leadership team. The school has been very successful in addressing the issues raised in the last inspection report and in driving forward standards through constructive involvement of an effective middle leadership. Performance management arrangements are well established and opportunities for continuous professional development impact positively on the experience of students. Self-evaluation arrangements are robust and result in the school knowing itself well.

The governing body is efficient and effective; governors provide very good support and challenge for the school. Together with the headteacher, the governing body has developed a very exciting vision for planned new accommodation, which is based on the successful teaching and learning methods introduced into the school in recent years. Current accommodation is generally well cared for, though dated, but a few classrooms are drab and uninspiring places for learning.

Targets set are challenging; they reflect well the selective intake and contribute to outstanding standards and progress in most subjects. Regular monitoring of student progress is embedded in the systems the school uses and this contributes well to high levels of achievement.

The school pays due regard to the opinions of parents through regular consultation resulting in systems that keep them well informed about the academic performance and personal development of the students. This, alongside substantial interaction with various local and international partners and organisations, helps the school to develop excellent community cohesion. The school has managed its specialist status well to spread good practice throughout the school, and to develop work with partners. It provides very good value for money and has excellent capacity to continue to provide a high quality education for students.

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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?	1	1
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	1	1

Achievement and standards

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

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	1	
The behaviour of learners	2	
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?	1	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	1

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1	1
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	1	1
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	1	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1	
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**

As you know, we recently inspected your school and I am writing to tell you about our findings. We agree with what many of you told us, that St Ambrose is an excellent school. The standard of work you produce is outstanding and you are making excellent progress in most subjects.

We were particularly impressed by the level of challenge you face in lessons and how well you respond to this, and by your participation in the amazing range of activities you get involved in outside lessons. We think St Ambrose is very successful at developing your understanding of other communities and of the wider world, and at helping you to achieve a wide range of skills that will help you when you leave school. It was good to see the extent to which you enjoy school and the respect you have for each other and for the staff and visitors. We know that most of you stay into the sixth form and achieve excellent results, which enable you to progress to university or follow other paths you choose.

We think the school is very well led and managed and that there is a good understanding of what can make the school even better! In particular, we have asked the headteacher to continue to spread the best practice in teaching and learning to ensure you make outstanding progress in all subjects.

I know you are looking forward to the new building. I would like to take this opportunity to wish all the best for your success and well-being in the future.