

St Mary's Catholic Comprehensive School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	108534
Local Authority	Newcastle upon Tyne
Inspection number	324792
Inspection dates	13–14 May 2009
Reporting inspector	Andrew Johnson 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	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	888
Sixth form	159
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Rev Denis Kellett
Headteacher	Mr John Foster
Date of previous school inspection	1 January 2006
School address	Benton Park Road Newcastle upon Tyne Tyne and Wear NE7 7PE
Telephone number	0191 2668813
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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 Mary's school is situated on the northern edge of the city of Newcastle upon Tyne. It was awarded specialist humanities status in 2007 and has held Healthy Schools status for the last five years. In 2008, it was awarded the Enviro-Schools Gold Award for its work on caring for the environment and the Diana Award for the work of its school council. Most students are drawn from local Catholic primary schools. A higher than average proportion come from minority ethnic heritages and do not speak English as a first language. Students come from a very wide range of backgrounds including some who live in areas of significant social and economic disadvantage. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is above average. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is slightly higher than the national average.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

This is an outstanding school which has been transformed by the outstanding leadership of the headteacher and senior management team. There is a moral imperative that all students will fulfil their potential and succeed. The Catholic ethos and mission shine through everything the school does, placing equality of opportunity at its heart. Students' achievements are outstanding, as is their personal development and well-being. Behaviour, which is excellent, has improved very significantly in the last three years. Lessons are free from distractions and almost all students are very keen to succeed. Students told inspectors that they enjoy coming to school and feel proud to be students of St Mary's. This is reflected in the significant improvement in their attendance.

Students make excellent progress in many subjects, particularly in Key Stage 4. In 2008, 85% of students gained five or more A* to C grades at GCSE. This is almost double the proportion who achieved those standards at the time of the previous inspection. When English and mathematics are included, there is a similar picture of improvement and, in 2008, the school exceeded the national average for the first time. Assessment carried out by teachers this year, shows further significant improvement in standards in both key stages.

The good quality of teaching, combined with students' excellent attitudes to learning, leads to outstanding progress. The quality of lessons continues to improve and there is no sense of complacency. Good practice is shared widely and very good training and support are available for teachers. Marking is done frequently. However, there is some inconsistency in its effectiveness in helping students understand what they need to do to improve. Teachers carefully track students' progress and intervene when necessary to give them very effective support. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, those who have joined the school later than Year 7, and those with English as an additional language also make outstanding progress because they are very well supported by teachers and teaching assistants.

The school has been very successful in developing and extending the curriculum, which is now outstanding. It provides students with flexible opportunities precisely matched to the wide range of needs and aspirations. The school has developed very productive links with other schools internationally, in Rwanda and China. An excellent range of residential experiences, visits and extra-curricular activities is offered at the school and well attended by all learners.

Although a relatively small number of parents returned the questionnaire to inspectors, those who did were overwhelmingly supportive of the school. Strong links with partner schools ensure a smooth transition for students into Year 7 and many parents commented on this as an outstanding strength of the school. Their views were typified by one parent who wrote that 'transition from primary to secondary school is fantastic and child-led'.

The school recognises it has a key role in building community cohesion. It is an extremely diverse and harmonious community where all faiths contribute to its spiritual, moral and cultural life. Students from minority ethnic groups make outstanding progress. Bullying and racial incidents are very rare but, when they do happen, there is a consistently strong and effective response. The number of fixed-period exclusions has been significantly reduced in the last three years and is now rare. Students feel safe and the procedures to ensure safeguarding follow current guidelines.

The headteacher has established a shared vision and collective purpose. The senior team takes a very effective 'hands-on' approach to management. The school's self-evaluation process is

meticulous and very robust. Managers track the progress of groups of students frequently and rigorously. This means they can accurately identify priorities for development. Accurate and appropriate systems are used to ensure the high quality of lessons. The governing body does a good job. Governors are keen to appoint and retain the best leaders and managers and have been extremely successful in doing so. A significant deficit budget has been removed and the school represents outstanding value for money. Its remarkable track record of improvement demonstrates its outstanding capacity to improve even further.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The school judges the effectiveness of the sixth form to be good and inspectors agreed. Students make good progress and last year's pass rate at A level was above the national average. Students are very loyal to the sixth form and the school. Teaching and learning are good. Students have excellent attitudes to learning and enjoy the opportunities they are given to learn independently.

There is a good range of traditional and vocational courses, although class sizes can be rather small. The number of students making the transition from Year 11 into sixth form has grown because of the increased breadth of courses. Students studying vocational courses are enthusiastic about their work because they see the relevance of what they are learning and how this may help to prepare them for their future careers. Last year, almost all students who applied, progressed to their first choice of university, including students who went on to study medicine and law. Leadership and management of the sixth form are good and the quality of the pastoral care and guidance students receive is excellent and results in outstanding personal development and well-being.

What the school should do to improve further

- Make sure that the marking of written work consistently gives students useful guidance on what they need to do to improve.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Most students enter the school in Year 7 having attained around average standards in the core subjects. However, the significant minority of students who start the school later, often have lots of ground to make up. The proportion of students passing GCSE examinations or their equivalent has risen exponentially and is well above the national average. When English and mathematics are included there has also been a huge improvement in the pass rate to above the national average. Current evidence indicates that standards are set to rise even further in 2009.

Students make outstanding progress between Years 7 and 11. The good start they make in Key Stage 3 accelerates for all groups of students in Key Stage 4. Vulnerable groups and students with learning difficulties make outstanding progress, not only academically, but also in their personal development. Inspectors observed students making good and sometimes better progress in almost all lessons.

Students make good progress in the sixth form. The pass rates at A and AS levels are above the national average although the proportion of students gaining high grades is below the national average. The proportion of students gaining qualifications in vocational subjects has risen significantly to around average.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

The school rightly judges personal development and well-being as outstanding. Spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development is given a high priority by the school and results in students developing a culture of respect for one another and their teachers. Students thoroughly enjoy lessons and are eager to learn. Newcomers from other schools or recent arrivals to this country are welcomed and helped to integrate swiftly into the life of the school. The great majority of students behave extremely well in lessons and around the school.

Students take advantage of the wide range of healthy eating options at lunchtime and have an extremely high awareness of the importance of a safe and healthy lifestyle. The school council plays an active role in school life. For example, members recently reviewed food provision in school and presented 'best practice' at a regional 'Food in Schools' conference. The success of this sort of initiative is not always communicated well to all students and their parents.

Students' overall attendance has improved significantly and for most groups is now good. Punctuality is very good. Students thoroughly enjoy coming to school, which they say is a safe, caring and happy community. Students make an outstanding contribution to the local community in many ways, including a large number of charitable and voluntary activities.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Inspectors agree with the school's own self-evaluation that teaching and learning are good. In some lessons, teaching and learning are outstanding; there are very few inadequate lessons. In the best lessons, work is fast paced and challenging and activities are varied and interesting, so students really enjoy learning and work very hard.

Teachers check students' learning carefully, explanations are crystal clear and work is made relevant to examination requirements so students achieve very well indeed. Students know the target level they are working towards. However, the day-to-day marking of students' work, although good in some subject areas, varies in quality and does not always give students sufficient guidance on how to improve. Teachers make good use of assessment data to intervene in students' learning and give them extra help if they are falling behind.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The curriculum is outstanding because it is so well matched to students' needs and aspirations. It is regularly reviewed to ensure an excellent balance of academic and vocational courses particularly at Key Stage 4. The school's specialist status in humanities makes a strong contribution to the effectiveness of the curriculum. It has exceeded targets and student participation is high. Students benefit from the emphasis on developing literacy and information and communication technology (ICT) across the curriculum.

The school provides excellent additional opportunities for students whose first language is not English so that they can engage with the curriculum. This is supported by an effective partnership with 'International House'. The extended curriculum contributes very effectively to the students' future economic well-being. Very few students leave without going into employment, further

education or training. The school has good links with local employers, universities and works well in partnership with organisations such as Building Futures East. Work-related learning is well developed in all key stages.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Care, guidance and support are outstanding. Tutors know the students very well and build very good relationships with them. All appropriate safeguarding and health and safety procedures are in place. Communication with parents is very good and they receive frequent reports which inform them about their child's progress. Very effective assessment procedures are in place to support those who are falling behind or need extra help. Support for those whose first language is not English is very good. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive excellent support in lessons. Support staff are very well deployed and provide valuable support to vulnerable groups. Guidance and support at key transition points between schools and the sixth form are strong and helps students settle in quickly. The school is keen to develop its sixth form provision but students are still given impartial guidance to ensure they make appropriate option choices for their chosen career pathways.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

The leaders of this school have brought about remarkable improvements in the achievement, standards and personal development of students. There has been a sustained and absolute focus on improving progress throughout the school and particularly in Key Stage 4. Staff are supported to improve through useful continuous professional development. Great care is taken to recruit teachers and managers of the highest quality. Through effective performance management across the whole school, all staff now take responsibility for the progress made by students.

Governors are effective in their role as 'critical friend'. Resources are used very effectively to ensure both outstanding achievement and value for money. A significant budget deficit has been removed and the school is now initiating plans for a new and exciting building. The school is very successful in promoting community cohesion. Partnerships with primary schools and support agencies are very effective and have a significant impact on many aspects of the school's work.

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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	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	1	1

Achievement and standards

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

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?	1	2
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	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	1	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	1	
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**

15 May 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of St Mary's Catholic Comprehensive School, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE7 7PE

Thank you for welcoming the inspection team to your school. We enjoyed the visit and particularly enjoyed meeting you and joining your lessons. I am very pleased to tell you that we think your school is outstanding.

You told us you were very happy with your education and have seen big improvements since the last inspection and we agree. Mr Foster and the staff have brought about remarkable improvements to your achievement and standards, behaviour and attendance. We were pleased to see that you are playing your part by trying hard in lessons. The academic progress you make is outstanding. Lessons are usually good and often excellent. The care, guidance and support you receive is outstanding and this means that you are given the best chance to develop into confident and mature young people.

Students join the school from a very wide variety of backgrounds and this adds considerably to its strength. The school is very good at ensuring everyone reaches their full potential. The curriculum has been expanded to ensure that it offers excellent opportunities in both academic and vocational courses. There is a good sixth form that is growing because of its success.

Mr Foster, the governors and staff have ambitious plans in place for the new building and to make even more improvements to standards. We believe the school has an excellent capacity to improve and will go from strength to strength. We made one suggestion to help them. We think marking could improve in some subjects to help you understand what it is you need to do to improve.

We think St Mary's plays a very significant part in your community by bringing students together from many backgrounds and providing them with an excellent education. We think you are absolutely right to be proud of your achievements and your school.

On behalf of the inspection team I would like to wish you all the best for the future.

Andrew Johnson, HMI