

Nicholas Breakspear Catholic School

Inspection report

| | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| Unique Reference Number | 117584 |
| Local Authority | Hertfordshire |
| Inspection number | 379446 |
| Inspection dates | 18–19 October 2011 |
| Reporting inspector | Frank Knowles |

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 | 11–18 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Gender of pupils in the sixth form | Mixed |
| Number of pupils on the school roll | 924 |
| Of which, number on roll in the sixth form | 172 |
| Appropriate authority | The governing body |
| Chair | Linda Graham |
| Headteacher | Phil Jakszta |
| Date of previous school inspection | 18 March 2009 |
| School address | Colney Heath Lane St Albans AL4 0TT |
| Telephone number | 01727 860079 |
| Fax number | 01727 848912 |
| Email address | johnsons@nicholasbreakspear.herts.sch.uk |

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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by five additional inspectors, who observed 45 lessons taught by 36 teachers. They held discussions with a number of groups of students in Years 7 to 11 and in the sixth form. Inspectors also held discussions with staff and with members of the governing body. They analysed the school's data on its performance, including students' attainment and progress, and reviewed case studies of student support. They reviewed a range of documentation provided by the school, including policies and department reviews. Inspectors observed the school's work, and looked in detail at the school's arrangements for safeguarding students. They also analysed the responses on questionnaires completed by 65 parents and carers, 160 from students and 35 from staff.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- How effective are the strategies the school uses to support improved achievement among different groups such as girls, students who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, and students whose circumstances may make them vulnerable?
- How effectively do teachers plan learning activities that match individual needs, provide the right levels of challenge, and engage students actively in their learning?
- What impact has the school had in improving the consistency of teaching and learning and in making middle leaders more accountable for bringing about improvement in their departments?

Information about the school

The roll of this average-sized school has reduced in the last year, following the withdrawal of free bus travel to the school. Students attend from a wide area centred on St Albans. There are many more boys than girls. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is much lower than the national average, although the school believes this to be affected by low rates of claiming among parents and carers. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is average, but a below-average proportion have a statement of special educational needs. Nearly one third of students come from a wide variety of minority ethnic backgrounds, predominantly from European and Black African heritages. The proportion of students who speak English as an additional language is greater than the national average, but the number who are at the early stages of learning English is small. The main other languages spoken by students are Shona, Italian and Polish.

The school has been a specialist sports college for some years. The withdrawal of funding for this aspect of the school's work has led to a planned reduction in the school's partnership work in this area over the next year. The school has gained the Sportsmark, Artsmark Silver and Investors in People awards and has achieved national Healthy Schools status.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

3

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

3

Main findings

Nicholas Breakspeare Catholic School provides a satisfactory education for its students. The school's outstanding care, guidance and support and good curriculum are not matched by the quality of teaching, which is satisfactory overall but varies between and within departments. As a result, pupils enjoy coming to school but are making only satisfactory progress. Their enthusiasm for learning, understanding of their targets and their capacity to work together are all good, but these aspects of their development are not supported by sufficiently challenging teaching to ensure they make faster progress. Consequently, attainment shows gradual improvement but remains average overall, with considerable variation between subjects.

The school has an exceptionally strong, caring ethos which is shared by all staff and valued by students. Parents and carers noted the high level of support provided for their children in their responses to the inspection questionnaire. Students feel safe and reported in discussions that there was very little bullying, and that any rare instances were dealt with quickly and effectively. Their progress is tracked very well, with all students aware of their assessment targets and nearly all clear about what they need to do reach them. Support for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is good and, as a result, they make good progress. Guidance on future education and career choices is very well targeted, especially around the times of choosing options and moving on to the next stage of education. More generally, staff have a very good understanding of students as individuals and a very high level of commitment to supporting students whose circumstances may make them vulnerable. There is an exceptionally strong adherence among staff and students to the school's values, set out in its mission statement and prominently displayed throughout the school. Opportunities for students to reflect deeply about their lives are unusually good and include an annual retreat for all students. They value these opportunities highly and one student commented in a discussion, 'You gain something each time you go.' The way the school promotes respect for everyone, irrespective of their background, is very good.

Several aspects of teaching such as teachers' subject knowledge, relationships with students and classroom management are typically good, but learning activities are often not matched closely enough to the students' differing needs to ensure they are fully challenged or engaged actively in their work. Over-long teacher introductions slow learning, too, but students are enthusiastic and well behaved, even in situations where they are passive listeners. In the better lessons they show how capable they are of participating effectively in groups, pairs and as independent learners.

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The school's leaders have developed and maintained a very strong school ethos but have not had the same success in improving the quality or consistency of teaching. Senior leaders' evaluations of teaching and learning are accurate. The school's guidance, however, on what constitutes a good lesson is neither full enough nor rigorous enough to support improved practice or the work of middle leaders, and their effectiveness varies. Assessment data are not used effectively to evaluate the progress of different groups of students so that action can be taken rapidly to bring about improvement, and data analysis is not always used to identify clear priorities to support strategic planning. For example, there is currently no focus on improvements in Key Stage 3 to reduce the need for later support and intervention in Year 11. Improvement has been gradual, but not strong enough to accelerate students' progress significantly. This means the school's capacity for sustained improvement is currently no better than satisfactory.

Up to 40% of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory may receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise the quality of teaching and learning so that the large majority of lessons are good or better by the end of the school year, ensuring that staff training and evaluation focus on:
 - more challenging activities that demand the active engagement of students
 - activities designed specifically to match students' different needs
 - improved questioning to extend students' responses and to assess their understanding
 - marking that is consistently effective in showing students how to improve their work.
- Improve the quality of leadership and management by:
 - increasing the level of strategic analysis of data to evaluate the school's performance and the outcomes of its strategies for improvement
 - setting out expectations clearly, particularly in respect of teaching and learning, and enhancing the ability of middle leaders to undertake the full range of their responsibilities
 - including a strategic, long-term focus on the development of teaching and learning in Key Stage 3.
- Make better use of assessment data to analyse the progress made by different groups of students and identify strengths and areas for improvement.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

3

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Overall standards are gradually increasing, despite a dip in 2010 that was retrieved in 2011, and are broadly average. Students join the school with broadly average attainment and make satisfactory progress. While GCSE results and students’ progress vary considerably in different subjects, there is little variation in the attainment of different groups. The inspection confirmed this picture in lessons, where the quality of learning and students’ progress varied as a result of inconsistent teaching, but was similar for different groups. Girls played a full part in lessons and their learning and progress matched that of boys, although in 2010 assessment data suggest that their progress was slower. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, and those speaking English as an additional language and at the early stages of learning English, made good progress. Their induction into the school is very carefully managed, with continuing high-quality support. All students were ready to contribute in lessons when given the opportunity and were enthusiastic learners, even when set less interesting and mundane tasks. A strong focus on preparation for the world of work in the school’s programme for personal, social and health education means that students develop good workplace skills, and it includes good support for students who have weaker basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Most students play a full part in the life of the school. Many take part in sporting activities and respond well to the good promotion of healthy eating and exercise. Their behaviour in lessons and around the school is good. Peer mentors and school councillors play an important part in sustaining the very supportive climate. Students’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding, largely because of the opportunities they have to reflect deeply on their lives and those of others. Students have a very good understanding of cultural differences and moral principles, and share the school mission’s clearly stated values.

These are the grades for pupils’ outcomes

| | |
|---|----------|
| Pupils’ achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning | 3 |
| Taking into account: | |
| Pupils’ attainment ¹ | 3 |
| The quality of pupils’ learning and their progress | 3 |
| The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress | 2 |
| The extent to which pupils feel safe | 2 |
| Pupils’ behaviour | 2 |
| The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles | 2 |
| The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community | 2 |
| The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being | 2 |
| Taking into account: | |
| Pupils’ attendance ¹ | 3 |

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

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Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

The extent of pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

1

How effective is the provision?

Some teachers devise challenging and interesting activities that take learning forward at a fast pace, while in others students are not challenged to think deeply. Some lessons have long introductions in which students are passive listeners, sometimes answering just an occasional question. Teachers’ planning varies in the way it provides different activities or resources to meet students’ needs. Despite distinguishing between what all, most or some students will achieve, in practice it often leads to the same activity being given to the whole class, with some students achieving more right answers than the norm and others fewer. Marking is also inconsistent, with some students’ books not marked recently and variation in the amount of written guidance and support provided. Some teachers are very adept at drawing out extended responses from students after careful thought, while others use questions that demand single-word answers and no explanations. Questioning to assess understanding varies similarly. Some good use of red, amber and green stickers to indicate different levels of confidence in learning contrasts with teachers accepting answers from a few enthusiastic students which give no indication of the understanding of the rest of the class.

The curriculum meets the needs of students well. The curriculum in Years 7 to 9 underpins that of later years well. Option choices for Year 10 are flexible and wide-ranging. A number of vocational subjects, provided in conjunction with a local further education college, further broaden the range of courses offered. For a few students, alternative curriculum arrangements, including some placements in local businesses, provide good support. The school has a strong focus on achievement in literacy and numeracy, particularly in ensuring as many students as possible achieve at least a grade C in both English and mathematics. Popular sports activities after school stem from the school’s previous sports college status, but there are fewer other extra-curricular activities than is typical in a school of this size.

The transition arrangements from primary schools are very thorough and students from Year 7 spoke very positively about their experience. Students in all years welcome the excellent support they receive from adults, particularly tutors, heads of year and inclusion leaders, and from older students. Those involved in discussions with the inspectors were very clear that they could approach staff with a concern and they would always receive timely and helpful support. Support and guidance throughout the school on career-related issues are wide-ranging and thorough. Students who speak English as an additional language and who are at the early stages of learning English are well supported in withdrawal groups, with a focus on fast integration into mainstream classes. The tracking of students’ progress is very effective in identifying individual students who need additional support. The curriculum support unit offers a quiet working retreat, and the behaviour support unit provides support for short periods for students whose behaviour falls below the expected standards. The head of student services provides excellent support for

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Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

students who are persistently absent.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

| | |
|--|----------|
| The quality of teaching | 3 |
| Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning | 3 |
| The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships | 2 |
| The effectiveness of care, guidance and support | 1 |

How effective are leadership and management?

The recently reorganised senior leadership team has a clear focus on evaluating the performance of different subject departments and a renewed focus on improving the quality of teaching. Self-evaluation is accurate, but actions to bring about improvement have resulted in gradual, rather than rapid, growth. The absence of a clear, rigorous set of expectations of good teaching within the school's teaching and learning policy restricts the ability of middle leaders to take on responsibility for improving teaching and learning in their areas.

Strategic planning has improved, but does not always take enough account of school data to identify where development is needed. For example, analysis of data about the prior attainment of the school's small intake of girls has not been factored into the school's thinking. The school does not rigorously evaluate the impact of its actions to bring about improvement, so is not fully aware of their cost-effectiveness. The governing body has changed significantly since the last inspection, including a new chair, and is now playing a more prominent role in school improvement. Its members are aware of the school's strengths and weaknesses and recognise that improvement has not been fast enough. Over recent years, the school has brought a significant budget deficit back into balance at the same time as managing a much reduced budget. This is a considerable achievement and the governing body played a very supportive role in managing the necessary staff reductions.

The school's approaches to safeguarding its students are good, with all staff trained and good monitoring of practice by the governing body. Discrimination of any kind is tackled robustly. The school is not so effective at promoting equality of opportunity because it lacks data about the progress of different groups of students. This means it is difficult to identify underperformance by any of these groups at an early enough stage to bring about improvement before an external assessment takes place. The school's promotion of community cohesion is good, particularly within the local community. Links with a school in South Africa support students' understanding of their place in the wider world. Good relationships with external partners enhance transition to Year 7, specialist support for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, and the curriculum in Year 10 and 11 and the sixth form.

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Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

These are the grades for leadership and management

| | |
|--|----------|
| The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement | 3 |
| Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning | 3 |
| The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met | 2 |
| The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers | 2 |
| The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being | 2 |
| The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination | 3 |
| The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures | 2 |
| The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion | 2 |
| The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money | 3 |

Sixth form

The sixth form provides a satisfactory and improving post-16 education. Attainment is broadly average and improving at A level, particularly in the percentage of higher grades achieved. Results at AS level are improving at a faster rate, as a result of the concerted effort made by sixth form leaders to bring about improvements in teaching and learning in Years 12 and 13. Retention from Year 12 into Year 13 is now much improved. In lessons, teaching and learning vary as they do in the rest of the school, although the extent to which students work independently and take responsibility for their learning is noticeably greater than in Years 10 and 11. Sixth form students make a strong contribution to the life of the school through their work in support of other students, and also to the wider community. The curriculum provides a good range of courses, including some vocational options, in conjunction with a consortium of three other schools. The school recognises that there are not enough level 2 courses to widen participation in post-16 education.

The systems for care, guidance and support work as effectively in the sixth form as in the rest of the school, and students are very well supported. Individual tracking of progress deals effectively with potential underperformance through additional support sessions. Study facilities have improved with the opening of a new sixth form building. The leadership of the sixth form has recently been restructured and the new leaders have made a good start in driving up the rate of improvement. The systems introduced to help reduce variations in progress within and between subjects are beginning to have an impact and are building the capacity for sustained further improvement in the sixth form.

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Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

These are the grades for the sixth form

| | |
|--|----------|
| Overall effectiveness of the sixth form | 3 |
| Taking into account: | 3 |
| Outcomes for students in the sixth form | 3 |
| The quality of provision in the sixth form | 3 |
| Leadership and management of the sixth form | 3 |

Views of parents and carers

A smaller than average percentage of parents and carers responded to the inspection questionnaire, but it followed very shortly after the school’s own survey of parents’ and carers’ views. The very large majority responded positively to the questions, with about one third adding a positive comment, typically about the school’s caring approach or the transition arrangements from primary schools into Year 7.

A small number of respondents added more critical comments, a few noting a lack of response to communication with the school, especially in science, and that the school did not take account of their concerns. The school is aware of this issue, and is currently in the final stages of preparing a new communication policy. A few parents and carers felt that the school did not deal with unacceptable behaviour effectively. Inspectors found the school’s systems are working well and that behaviour is good. A few parents and carers commented, too, on inconsistencies in teaching. Inspectors spent considerable time evaluating the quality of teaching, and the inconsistencies found have resulted in a clear area for improvement.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted’s questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Nicholas Breakspeare Catholic School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 65 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 924 pupils registered at the school.

| Statements | Strongly agree | | Agree | | Disagree | | Strongly disagree | |
|---|----------------|----|-------|----|----------|----|-------------------|---|
| | Total | % | Total | % | Total | % | Total | % |
| My child enjoys school | 46 | 71 | 15 | 23 | 4 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| The school keeps my child safe | 38 | 58 | 25 | 38 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| The school informs me about my child’s progress | 40 | 62 | 25 | 38 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| My child is making enough progress at this school | 24 | 37 | 34 | 52 | 6 | 9 | 0 | 0 |
| The teaching is good at this school | 25 | 38 | 33 | 51 | 6 | 9 | 0 | 0 |
| The school helps me to support my child’s learning | 27 | 42 | 29 | 45 | 7 | 11 | 0 | 0 |
| The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle | 26 | 40 | 30 | 46 | 7 | 11 | 0 | 0 |
| The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment) | 34 | 52 | 24 | 37 | 4 | 6 | 1 | 2 |
| The school meets my child’s particular needs | 30 | 46 | 26 | 40 | 5 | 8 | 0 | 0 |
| The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour | 36 | 55 | 19 | 29 | 6 | 9 | 3 | 5 |
| The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns | 32 | 49 | 22 | 34 | 7 | 11 | 3 | 5 |
| The school is led and managed effectively | 41 | 63 | 16 | 25 | 4 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| Overall, I am happy with my child’s experience at this school | 42 | 65 | 17 | 26 | 4 | 6 | 2 | 3 |

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

| Grade | Judgement | Description |
|---------|--------------|--|
| Grade 1 | Outstanding | These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. |
| Grade 2 | Good | These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well. |
| Grade 3 | Satisfactory | These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils. |
| Grade 4 | Inadequate | These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves. |

Overall effectiveness of schools

| Type of school | Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools) | | | |
|----------------------|---|------|--------------|------------|
| | Outstanding | Good | Satisfactory | Inadequate |
| Nursery schools | 43 | 47 | 10 | 0 |
| Primary schools | 6 | 46 | 42 | 6 |
| Secondary schools | 14 | 36 | 41 | 9 |
| Sixth forms | 15 | 42 | 41 | 3 |
| Special schools | 30 | 48 | 19 | 3 |
| Pupil referral units | 14 | 50 | 31 | 5 |
| All schools | 10 | 44 | 39 | 6 |

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2010 to 8 April 2011 and are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

Common terminology used by inspectors

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Achievement: | the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training. |
| Attainment: | the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons. |
| Capacity to improve: | the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement. |
| Leadership and management: | the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school. |
| Learning: | how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners. |
| Overall effectiveness: | <p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement. ■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils. ■ The quality of teaching. ■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships. ■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support. |
| Progress: | the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started. |

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



20 October 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of Nicholas Breakspear Catholic School, St Albans, AL4 0TT

Thank you for the warm welcome you gave the inspectors when we visited your school earlier this week. We valued the contributions you made when we talked with you about your work in lessons and, more generally, in the discussion groups and around the school. They were very helpful in providing a clear picture of the school and its day-to-day life. We have judged the school to be satisfactory, which means it does some things well but also has some areas to improve.

You make satisfactory progress as you move through the school and reach average standards overall. You are enthusiastic about learning, your behaviour is good and you make good progress in those lessons where you take part in challenging and interesting activities. But we found that teaching varies too much to ensure you make good progress all of the time.

The school has a very caring ethos and you told us how much you value the opportunities you have to reflect on your lives and share any concerns with staff. The headteacher and staff provide outstanding care, guidance and support for you all, from before you begin at the school to the point at which you leave.

The school runs smoothly but the school's leaders are not making enough use of available information when they plan for its future. We have asked them to make improvements in three areas:

- make sure teaching is consistently good so you make faster progress
- be clearer about what good lessons should contain, to help subject leaders manage and improve their departments
- find out more about the progress different groups of you make, to share good practice and provide support where progress is slower.

For your part, you can help this improvement by continuing to contribute as much as you can in lessons, whether you work on your own, in groups or pairs, or as a class. We wish you well for the future.

Yours sincerely

Frank Knowles
Lead inspector

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