

St Michael's Catholic Grammar School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	101361
Local Authority	Barnet
Inspection number	307666
Inspection date	13 February 2008
Reporting inspector	Asyia Kazmi HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Grammar (selective)
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number on roll	
School	730
6th form	251
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr B Hartigan
Headteacher	Miss U Morrissey
Date of previous school inspection	31 January 2005
School address	Nether Street North Finchley London N12 7NJ
Telephone number	020 8446 2256
Fax number	020 8343 9598

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Introduction

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

The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: achievement and standards; teaching and learning; leadership and management; personal development and well-being and care, guidance and support. Evidence was gained from lesson observations, from discussions with leaders and students and from the evaluation of a range of documentation. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail but the inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified. These have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

St Michael's Catholic Grammar School is a smaller than average school with a collaboration at sixth form level with a local boys' Catholic comprehensive school. Selection to the main school is based on a commitment to the Catholic faith and academic aptitude. However, students in the sixth form are from different faiths.

The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is very low. Although a high proportion of students are from minority ethnic backgrounds, the majority are White British; other predominant groups are of White European, African and Indian heritage. Approximately a quarter of students speak English as an additional language, this is higher than the national average. Levels of attainment on entry are well above the national average. A very small proportion of students have learning difficulties.

The school was awarded specialist language college status in September 2006 and has a healthy schools award.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

St Michael's is an outstanding school. As it celebrates its centenary this year, it continues to go from strength to strength. Standards are exceptionally high, amongst the highest found nationally, both at GCSE and A level, and continue to improve.

The headteacher and her deputy provide outstanding leadership. They, very ably supported by the senior leadership team, have a strong vision for the education of girls rooted in the Catholic faith, which contributes so much to the ethos of the school. Together they have created an environment which allows young women to fulfil their ambition and enable their talents to flourish in all aspects.

Girls are confident, motivated, articulate and astute. Their behaviour is excellent and attendance is high; they are considerate and very supportive of, and interested in, one another and their studies. Relationships between students and teachers are excellent. One student told inspectors, 'We are like one big family, everyone is made to feel equal.' Students are very aware of other cultures and get on well in the multi-cultural mix in the school. Senior leaders have been explicit in promoting equal opportunities and ensuring links are made with members of other communities.

As expected of these academically able girls, the proportion of students achieving A and A* grades is very high, particularly in English, drama, design and technology, humanities, religious studies and Spanish. Virtually all students achieve good GCSE passes in all the subjects they take. Achievement is outstanding and all groups, including those with learning difficulties, share in this success. The curriculum for those with learning difficulties is adapted, and support provided, to maximise their chances of being successful. Senior leaders use a range of data in their efforts to maintain the high standards students attain. A focus on measuring students' achievement against national rates of progress has been more recent and is helping to raise expectations even further.

Senior leaders have responded quickly in areas where achievement was not as strong, with impressive results. For example, targeted support in some science subjects at A Level brought about significant improvements in standards in 2007. They have accurately identified the need to raise achievement in mathematics and have put in place appropriate actions to do so. Subject leaders in mathematics have reviewed the curriculum and put in place strategies to accelerate progress, which are already delivering results. School data and inspection evidence lends confidence to the school's view that standards will be higher in mathematics this year.

There are robust systems in place to check the work of the school, these include departmental reviews and annual departmental self-evaluation. This process is further strengthened by the regular analysis of students' progress undertaken by senior leaders, which ensures no student is allowed to slip through the net. A strong feature of this thorough monitoring is that it dovetails pastoral and academic aspects of students' achievement. Students know how well they are doing, how well they should be doing, and how to improve. School self-evaluation is accurate and rigorous. It enables timely intervention in ensuring all aspects of the school's work are as good as the best. However, some students would welcome greater opportunity to have their views inform school improvement.

'Teaching is high quality with a good element of fun', a parent reported to inspectors. Teaching is indeed outstanding. Teachers have excellent subject knowledge and very high expectations. They use a wide range of teaching and learning techniques to engage and enthuse students.

Teachers' questioning is skilful; it develops students' understanding of the subject matter and their reasoning skills. Regular opportunities for students to work collaboratively further enhance their learning and, as one noted, 'It gives us an opportunity to learn from students who we may not otherwise learn from'. Learning through information and communication technology is a developing strength of the school. Students are very positive about the use of interactive whiteboards and report they also have regular opportunities to use them. They are very appreciative of the learning clinics on offer where they can get further help. Senior leaders are very aware of the strengths in teaching and where there is scope for improvement and intervene accordingly.

The overall curriculum provision and wide-ranging extra-curricular activities very effectively meet the needs and aspirations of students. The specialist language college status has enabled extensive opportunities to extend the curriculum. It has also benefited local primary schools and the local community by providing language classes for adults. There are numerous international visits and exchanges. Along with the opportunity to study several European languages, many students opt to study Japanese or Mandarin during their lunch breaks. Highly effective partnerships have been established with work-based learning providers and employers, which prepares these academically able students thoroughly for their future economic well-being. Healthy living and participation in sport and enrichment activities are encouraged and popular. The new sports hall, funded by the school's own community, will provide much needed facilities to enhance the sports offer.

Outstanding care, guidance and support contribute to students' excellent personal development and well-being. Transition, both into school and into higher education, is well planned and students settle quickly and confidently. The school works in close partnership with support agencies to ensure any additional needs of students are met. There are few incidences of bullying, and when it occurs the vast majority of students are confident it is dealt with quickly and effectively. Opportunities for students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are extensive. As a Christian school, the development of spirituality is a high priority and a strength of the school. A well-organised religious education programme is very effective in helping young people to understand the role of faith in a diverse world. As a result, students learn to work with and value others, develop tolerance and understand the needs of others. Students undertake numerous responsibilities around the school and are excellent role models for each other. Through their fundraising efforts, significant sums of money are raised for charities.

Parents are very positive about the work of the school. Many wrote about the strengths of the school summed up by one parent's comment, 'My daughter has blossomed at this school in academic ability, character and confidence.'

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

Standards in the sixth form are exceptionally high and achievement is outstanding. The leadership and management of the sixth form are highly effective and have a very successful focus on raising achievement. Senior leaders have narrowed variation in standards between subjects to achieve the highest ever standards in 2007.

The outstanding care, guidance and support enjoyed by students in the main school continue in the sixth form. Students especially appreciate the ready help and guidance they receive from teachers who inspire confidence through their expert subject knowledge. As a result, learning

is enthusiastic and sharply focused. The school's specialist college status provides rich and diverse opportunities for sixth form students to learn many languages. Students benefit greatly from the opportunity of an international experience during which they can study or work abroad. The rigorous assessment and tracking of students' progress, followed up with effective action, contribute to their excellent achievement. Many speak of a determination to reach the challenging targets set by their teachers. The collaboration with a local boys' Catholic school ensures students are able to choose from a wide range of subjects. This, as well as many new students who join the sixth form from other schools, adds to the rich diversity in the student population.

What the school should do to improve further

- Enhance systems for self-evaluation to take greater account of students' views of the work of the school.

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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 disabilities make progress	1	

Personal development and well-being

How good is 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	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	1	
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 the 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

¹ Grade 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.

Annex A

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	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	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	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

04 March 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of St Michael's Catholic Grammar School, London, N12 7NJ

I would like to thank you very much for the warm welcome you gave us when we visited your school recently. We valued the discussions we had with you and I would like to take this opportunity to share our findings. St Michael's is an outstanding school.

Your headteacher provides outstanding leadership which ensures you develop very successfully into confident, thoughtful and considerate young women. She is very well supported by senior leaders who ensure you receive excellent care, guidance and support. You were very positive about the teaching you receive and told us about the many opportunities the school provides for you, including clubs and international visits. Many people we spoke to told us about the excellent shows and concerts you put on. Your achievement in examinations is exceptional. Standards are amongst the highest found nationally and continue to improve both at GCSE and A levels.

We were particularly impressed with how well you get on together and support one another. The Catholic ethos contributes much to the work of the school and your development. Your behaviour is impeccable and you have very good understanding of other cultures and faiths, this is important. The focus on equal opportunities is a further strength of the school and contributes to the very positive relationships apparent to all.

In our discussions and observations, we were very impressed with how accurate and astute you were in your analysis of the school's strengths. We feel that senior leaders would benefit from enhancing the opportunities that already exist to use your views to improve the school even further.

We very much enjoyed visiting your school and I wish you and your school every success in the future.

Yours sincerely,

Asyia Kazmi

Her Majesty's Inspector