

St Nicholas Catholic High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	111450
Local Authority	Cheshire
Inspection number	310601
Inspection date	2 October 2007
Reporting inspector	Mark Williams 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	1273
6th form	273
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Fr John Joyce
Headteacher	Mr G Boyle
Date of previous school inspection	22 March 2004
School address	Greenbank Lane Hartford Northwich Cheshire CW8 1JW
Telephone number	01606 75420
Fax number	01606 784586

Age group	11-18
Inspection date	2 October 2007
Inspection number	310601

© Crown copyright 2007

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Further copies of this report are obtainable from the school. Under the Education Act 2005, the school must provide a copy of this report free of charge to certain categories of people. A charge not exceeding the full cost of reproduction may be made for any other copies supplied.

Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an Additional Inspector. As part of Ofsted's induction programme another HMI was present observing the inspection.

Inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: achievement and standards; pupils' personal development and well-being; progress of students in the sixth form; the impact of the school's specialism; and the school's use of self-evaluation. Evidence was gathered from the school's self-evaluation form; national published assessment data and the school's own assessment records; a range of school documentation; observation of the school at work; discussions with staff and pupils; and the parents' questionnaires. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but there is no evidence to suggest that the school's own evaluations, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

St Nicholas Catholic High is a larger than average sized school situated in a mixed socio-economic area. Ninety percent of pupils are of White British heritage. A rising proportion of pupils from Eastern Europe are admitted to the school who speak little or no English. Fewer pupils are entitled to free school meals than is the case nationally. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is also below the national average.

The school has a business and enterprise specialism. It holds the Eco-schools green flag. It has also been awarded Healthy Schools status and has achieved the Inclusion Quality Mark.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

St Nicholas Catholic High is a good school where pupils achieve well in their learning and personal development and well-being. The school's business and enterprise specialism has a positive impact on pupils' and students' contribution to the community and their economic awareness. Most parents who responded to the inspection questionnaire are highly supportive and complimentary about the school. Leaders demonstrate good capacity to improve further the work of the school.

The majority of pupils enter the school with attainment above that found nationally. They go on to reach standards at the end of Key Stage 3 and at GCSE that are above, and often well above, average. For example, over the period 2004 to 2007 over 70% of pupils attained five or more GCSEs (including English and mathematics) at the higher A* to C grades. This represents good progress. A small group of pupils, girls, who arrive in Year 7 with lower abilities, make slower progress, although it is never less than satisfactory. The school has begun to monitor this group in order to accelerate their progress. Vulnerable pupils, for example, those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those from minority ethnic backgrounds, receive focused support from teaching assistants and specialists and they too make good progress in their learning. Nonetheless, the school is not complacent. Where dips in standards have occurred, in Key Stage 3 results in 2005 for example, appropriate and effective measures were quickly put into place and improvement secured.

The personal development and well-being of pupils are good with aspects, including behaviour, that are outstanding. Inspectors found pupils to be very polite, courteous, caring and friendly. The great majority clearly enjoy school and this is reflected in their above average levels of attendance. They make an excellent contribution to the school and wider community, for example, by acting as peer mentors to younger pupils, assisting with school productions and organising mini markets to raise funds for charitable causes. There is a good range of councils for pupils to air views, including the headteacher's question time, and pupils report they are listened to well. Pupils' spiritual, moral and social development is outstanding, fully reflecting the strong Christian ethos of the school. Their cultural development is good and benefits from themed national days, for example, Polish and French days, which enable pupils to appreciate their European neighbours. The school is aware that one of the steps to outstanding cultural development is for pupils to demonstrate their responses to the many opportunities it provides to extend understanding of the wider world. Pupils respond enthusiastically to enterprise days and opportunities for work related learning, both enhanced by the school's specialism, and these prepare them well for securing economic well-being.

Teaching and learning are good. Lessons are typified by very good relations and positive attitudes to learning. Teachers explain clearly to pupils what they are to learn and refer back to these targets during lessons to ensure understanding is secure. Pupils work well together and enjoy opportunities for group and paired work. The school recognises that the pupils are capable learners and it is beginning to look at ways in which they can carry out more individual research and develop their own thinking skills.

The curriculum is good and enhanced by a very good range of extra-curricular activities. These ensure pupils have a good range of choices, including vocational courses, to help them in their learning and personal development. The business and enterprise specialism successfully

underpins work-related opportunities and is being embedded across all curriculum areas. Improvements since the previous inspection include a strong emphasis on citizenship.

The care, guidance and support given to pupils are good, overall. Vulnerable pupils receive outstanding care and support which helps to raise their self-esteem. Pupils at an early stage of learning English receive very good support and settle in well. The daily form tutor time is used very effectively, for example, to develop organisational skills. This time, and the approachability of form tutors, is appreciated by pupils. Increasingly effective strategies to monitor the progress of individuals and groups are being developed but are not yet embedded.

Leadership and management are good. The headteacher provides a good, strong and clear lead. There is a firm emphasis on developing leadership at all levels and a well defined focus on pupils' achievement. Challenging targets for improvement are set and mostly met. Leaders are highly visible around the school and this ensures a calm and orderly community. The knowledgeable governing body holds the school to account well. The school's own evaluation of its work, its strengths and its areas for development, is outstanding.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The sixth form at St Nicholas Catholic High School is good. It is led and managed well with the new head of sixth form building on established strengths, for example, the range of curriculum opportunities and the care and support of students by form tutors.

In recent years it has increased the range of courses on offer and become more inclusive in its outlook, admitting students with a wider range of GCSE results than in the past. As a result, it appeared that overall standards were declining. However, the true picture is one of students making good progress from their starting points and, despite the apparent decline, reaching standards that are good overall. In many subjects standards are outstanding. Standards in the applied science A Level were nationally recognised in 2006. Leaders in the sixth form are not complacent: they have strategies in place to improve achievement in identified subjects and more closely monitor and track the progress of students in lessons.

The curriculum is good and includes a wide range of A Level and other courses. Students enjoy a very broad range of extra clubs and activities. Teaching is good overall and relationships between teachers and students are very positive. Teachers have very good subject knowledge and deliver well-structured lessons with clear explanations. However, the use of information and communication technology as an integral aspect of teaching and learning is inconsistent and, on occasions, there is not enough emphasis on students' own research and the organisation of their work. This sometimes leads to a passive approach to learning and slower progress. The care and support offered to students is very good and guidance for individuals is improving as a result of well-conceived strategies and the effective use of form time. The form tutor programme is outstanding and contributes significantly to students' personal development.

The personal development and well-being of sixth form students are good. Students are responsible, very well behaved, show care and concern for others and are fully involved in the life of the school. They respond well to the variety of opportunities to develop and mature as leaders within the school community and beyond. They speak positively about the school. They are aware of its priorities and regard the positive relationships and sense of community as key strengths.

What the school should do to improve further

- Focus learning on individual needs in order that pupils develop their own research and thinking skills.
- Ensure the increasingly effective strategies to monitor the progress of individuals and groups of pupils are embedded fully.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaints about school inspection', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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
---	----------------	-------

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	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	2
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	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
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	2	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	2

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?	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	1	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	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	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

As you are aware your school was recently inspected. I am writing to you in order to thank you for your welcome and help during the inspection and to let you know our findings.

You will be pleased to know that we agree with your headteacher, staff and governors that St Nicholas Catholic High School is a good school. This is also what nearly all of you said when we spoke with you and how most of your parents/carers responded to the questionnaire. So what is so good about your school? Here are some of the judgements we have made.

- The standards you reach in Key Stage 3 tests, GCSEs and A Levels are above, and often well above, average and you make good progress in your learning.
- You are developing into good citizens. We were particularly impressed by your behaviour which we judge to be outstanding. We found you to be very polite and courteous. Nearly all of you enjoy school and this is reflected in your good attendance.
- Teaching is good. Your relationships with your teachers are good. They make clear to you what it is you are going to learn.
- You have a good curriculum with a wide range of courses and activities to choose from.
- The school cares for you and supports you very well.
- The school's business and enterprise specialism is helping you to understand and be involved in real life situations, including the world of work, well.
- You have a good quality sixth form.
- Your school is led well. Mr Boyle and his team know the school's strengths and areas for development well. They are clear in the ways forward. We found them to be very approachable and you said this too.

So what does your school need to do to improve? We have asked Mr Boyle to focus learning on individual needs in order that you develop your own research and thinking skills, and to fully implement strategies to monitor your progress. Making a school even better than it is is not just a job for the headteacher. We trust that you will all play your part, for as we constantly heard during the inspection, and agree wholeheartedly with, this is your school.