

St Thomas More High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	115363
Local Authority	Southend-on-Sea
Inspection number	326189
Inspection date	11 September 2008
Reporting inspector	Raymond Jardine

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	11–19
Gender of pupils	Boys
Number on roll	
School (total)	1017
Sixth form	237
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Joe Parsad
Headteacher	Mr Peter Travis
Date of previous school inspection	23 November 2005
School address	Kenilworth Gardens Westcliff-on-sea Essex SS0 0BW
Telephone number	01702 344933
Fax number	01702 436990

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors. They evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: how effectively the school has tackled the dip in pupils' achievements seen in 2007; how well the school promotes a sense of community and involvement among its pupils; and the extent to which systems for monitoring its performance, particularly teaching quality, have improved since the last inspection. Inspectors gathered evidence from parents' questionnaires and school documentation, observed lessons and held discussions with the chair of governors, senior leaders, other staff and with pupils. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

The school is about average in size. While most pupils are of White British backgrounds, a similar proportion to that found nationally come from a range of other ethnic groups, mainly White or mixed backgrounds. Fewer than average are entitled to free school meals. Almost four fifths are Catholic, reflecting the school's Catholic ethos and consequently, many pupils come from further afield than the immediate area. Very few are at an early stage of learning English. The proportion of pupils who have learning difficulties is below average; the main groupings have moderate learning or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. Attainment on entry to Year 7 for most years is a little above average. The mixed sixth form has consortium arrangements with neighbouring schools.

The school became a specialist mathematics and computing college in 2004. In June 2008, it gained the National 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: 2

St Thomas More high is a good school that provides a rounded education for its pupils. Its Catholic ethos and values pervade the school's work. Pupils mature into confident, courteous individuals, well prepared for the next stage in their education and adult life. Academic achievement is good and standards by Year 11 are considerably above average. The school has experienced changes in staffing and recruitment difficulties over the past two years, and some parents have expressed concern. Senior leaders and governors have worked very hard and successfully to overcome the difficulties and staffing is once again secure. The overwhelming majority of parents strongly endorse the school's work. They are pleased with the academic and pastoral support and guidance their children receive; a typical remark was 'Our son is achieving well both academically and emotionally'.

Standards in Year 11 in summer 2008 were considerably above average; almost three quarters of boys gained five or more GCSEs at Grade C or better. Their achievements, taking account of their attainment on entry to Year 7, were good. The school exceeded its targets to ensure that pupils' progress was within the top 25% of schools nationally. When English and mathematics are included in the five GCSEs, results continued to be above average as they had been in previous years. The overall 2008 results represent a considerable improvement and recovery from a dip in overall standards in 2007. There were a number of causes underlying the dip in that year. Staffing changes two years ago adversely affected some areas of the school's work and led to more varied standards between subjects. A new vocational computing course got off to a poor start, which affected the achievements of some lower attaining boys. Of equal concern to the school was that it did not act quickly enough to anticipate the problems. The school's senior leadership has also changed as new staff have joined it. They have led a series of actions to tackle the weaknesses. A key innovation, introduced in 2007, is a more regular and robust check on pupils' progress towards challenging targets with early intervention where necessary. Termly progress updates with pupils and their parents, together with close monitoring and analysis of assessment data by senior leaders has undoubtedly been a contributory factor in the improved standards of 2008. The variation in standards across subjects has reduced and vocational computing courses in particular were implemented much more successfully. The school was very close to meeting its specialist targets for both mathematics and computing in 2008. The school is aiming for higher standards still in 2009.

Standards in Year 9 are also considerably above average. Pupils' achievements from Years 7 to 9 have improved steadily since the last inspection and are now good. English has been a success story, where support to improve teaching quality and very effective leadership have led to considerable improvement in what was a relatively weak subject at the time of the last inspection. Pupils who have learning difficulties receive good support so that they progress well. Parents report how impressed they are with the attention to detail the school gives their sons to help meet their specific needs.

Pupils much enjoy school, particularly the very good relationships with their peers and adults. They say that they feel part of a community and are very proud to go to St Thomas More High. Attendance levels are well above average. The extensive range of additional activities, clubs and competitive sports contribute to pupils' good personal development. Pupils welcome the emphasis placed on eating healthily that the school provides. They feel safe and secure at school and most pupils respond very well to the system of rewards and sanctions. Pupils themselves help to devise the code of learning and, through their student voice, they are

consulted about teaching quality. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is very good; pupils learn about other cultural traditions and faiths and take part in many community activities. The school enjoys extensive links with the local community as well as links with schools abroad. Visits to many European countries, as well as exchanges, add to pupils' experience and understanding of other people. Behaviour is good. The school deals very robustly with incidents of harassment, and particularly any drug involvement. This has resulted in a significant number of temporary exclusions last year that the school is working to reduce. An internal pupil support unit, now well established, is proving effective in helping pupils who fall short of the school's expectations. Those who have experienced the support unit say that they continue to learn there, it has helped them to reflect, and that staff do much to help them re-integrate into lessons. Support and pastoral guidance as a whole, including transition arrangements from feeder schools, are very good and much appreciated by pupils and parents. A few parents raised concerns about the effectiveness of communication between school and home. However, the school has been working to improve communication, including through its reporting system. A pastoral manager now provides a single point of contact for parental concerns. The school agrees that further work is required to ensure that new arrangements become fully effective.

Teaching and learning have improved since the last inspection and are now good. Senior leaders accurately review teaching quality because they now focus more sharply on the impact that teaching has on learning outcomes. A key focus of training has been on making effective use of assessment to guide teaching, and on engaging pupils to learn more independently. Pupils say that they find most lessons interesting, appropriately challenging and that the varied activities help them to learn. Information and communication technology (ICT) is used very well to enhance teaching, and by pupils to help them learn for themselves, reflecting a positive impact that the school's specialist status is having. While teaching is now mostly good or better, pockets of weaker teaching remain which adversely affect pupils' progress. The good curriculum provides a number of pathways to qualifications in Year 11 and beyond which helps ensure that virtually no pupils are without further education, training or employment after Year 11. Due emphasis is given to specialist subjects in mathematics and computing which are both strengths in the school. Pupils report the positive impact of these subjects on their skills and welcome the opportunity provided for the wider community, including some parents, to learn using the school's facilities and expertise.

The headteacher provides good leadership and strategic direction for the school, with good support and challenge from the influential governing body. Standards of care are high and the school meets current requirements for safeguarding pupils. Senior leaders are becoming adept at driving forward key initiatives and monitoring the school's performance, particularly when using assessment and targets to guide their work. However, the qualities of middle leaders are less consistent in this respect. Several subjects are led very well; several, for example mathematics, draw very skilfully on a range of information, including patterns in pupil assessment data and teaching quality, all of which help to guide improvements in their subjects. However, the variation in quality of middle leadership mirrors some continuing variations in standards across subjects and so is a key area in which to achieve greater consistency. Overall, the potential for the school to improve further is good.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The mixed sixth form is popular and has increased considerably in size in recent years. A significant proportion of students come from other schools, and attainment on entry to Year 12 is broad and overall a little below average. Retention rates to complete courses in Years 12 and 13 are high. Pass rates exceeded those nationally at A-level in 2008 and improved significantly compared to the previous year. The proportion attaining A/B grades also improved. There is a good breadth of A-level and AS courses; a consortium with other providers extends choice further. However, pass grades in Year 12 at AS-level are not as good. This is partly because curriculum choices of Level 2 and vocational/applied courses are too limited to meet some students' needs fully; a weakness the school is currently working on. Overall, students achieve well and the great majority from Year 13 go on to higher education. Teaching and learning are good. Students enjoy the sixth form and say there is a good balance achieved between structured lessons and independent learning. Their personal development is outstanding, particularly their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Students take responsibility in the school and wider community, including voluntary work, and enjoy many extra-curricular opportunities. Leadership is consultative, involving staff and students, and provides good strategic direction.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve teaching quality further by eradicating the weaker teaching that remains.
- Build on the best practice to develop the skills of some middle leaders in monitoring performance in their subjects, and especially in using assessment information.

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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?	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/or disabilities make progress	2	

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?	2	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	
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 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

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	2	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	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	

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

12 September 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of St Thomas More High School, Westcliff on Sea, SS0 0BW

You will recall that two inspectors visited your school recently. We were very grateful for the polite welcome that we received and I am now writing to explain our findings to you. We think you go to a good school. Your enthusiasm for learning and enjoyment of school life impressed us both. You told us that you are proud of your school and that you learn within a safe and secure community where you are encouraged to achieve your best. GCSE and A-level results in 2008 were above average and represented good achievement for those who took them. The results are an improvement over the previous year and the school is aiming to do even better next year. The school has improved the way in which it checks its performance, particularly the progress you make towards your targets and this has helped to bring about higher standards. Senior leaders and governors have also been working hard and successfully to overcome considerable staff changes and this also helped to improve standards.

The school supports and guides you well. The sense of community that you have helped to create with the staff and governors reflects the school's distinctive Catholic ethos. Your involvement in the wider community, including links with schools abroad and visits to many European countries, helps you to develop spiritually, morally, socially and culturally. This, with the good academic standards and important skills such as in computing that you acquire, prepares you well for your next steps and adult life.

The school has become more adept at monitoring and improving the quality of education that you receive. We agree with senior leaders that most teaching is now good or better. Even so, the school is going to improve it further so that it is all good or better. You told us that you enjoy most lessons because interesting activities help you to learn for yourselves, both within lessons and when using the extensive facilities such as computer access. You can help staff by reviewing your own work to see how you can improve it so that you continue to do well.

There have been some real successes since the last inspection, for example in improving English. The school is working with subject leaders to ensure that there is less variation between subjects and they are all equally effective.

With our best wishes for your future at St Thomas More High School.

Ray Jardine

Lead inspector