

Nicholas Breakspear Catholic School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117584
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	326654
Inspection dates	18–19 March 2009
Reporting inspector	Anthony O'Malley HMI

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	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1100
Sixth form	181
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs J Brotherton
Headteacher	Mr P Jakszta
Date of previous school inspection	30 January 2006
School address	Colney Heath Lane St. Albans Hertfordshire AL4 0TT
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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

Nicholas Breakspeare Roman Catholic School has had sports college status since 2003. While slightly above average in size, it has considerably more boys than girls. Fewer students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities and statements of special educational needs than in most schools. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is above average. Students of Black British-African backgrounds are the largest minority ethnic group. The proportion eligible for free school meals is below average.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The school provides students with a satisfactory education. The actions taken since the previous inspection have had an adequate impact on raising standards and achievement. Students' achievement is satisfactory in the main school and in the sixth form. Their attainment when they start school in Year 7 is close to the national average. Standards remain average by the end of Year 11 and Year 13. However, a focus on improving outcomes for middle attaining students in Key Stage 4 has led to a greater proportion of students attaining five or more higher grade GCSEs, including English and mathematics. At the time of the previous inspection, boys achieved relatively better than girls, and those of average ability better than students at the opposite ends of the ability range. This remains the case. Students of Black British-African backgrounds and from other minority ethnic groups make the same progress as other groups. Support in lessons for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is relatively limited, but these students also make satisfactory progress.

Leadership and management are satisfactory. There are a great number of actions in the school improvement plan, but many of them do not have measurable indicators of success. This makes it very difficult for senior staff and governors to evaluate their impact. The plan does not focus sufficiently on the few key areas that will really make a difference. Senior leaders have an overgenerous view of the school's current effectiveness. Nevertheless, the success the school has achieved at increasing the proportion of students attaining higher grade GCSEs is evidence of satisfactory capacity to improve.

The quality of teaching is satisfactory. Teachers plan their lessons in appropriate detail, although the activities do not always meet the needs of all students in the class. As a result, some work is not demanding enough for the higher attainers, and it fails to provide enough structured support for the lower attainers. The marking of work is inconsistent and in some subjects gives students insufficient guidance on how they can improve. The good curriculum provides students with a wide range of academic and vocational courses in the main school. Initiatives implemented through the school's sports specialism are contributing effectively to the curriculum and students' personal development. However, they have yet to have a significant impact on standards in most other subjects.

Students' personal development and well-being are good, as are the care, guidance and support they receive. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good, enhanced by the school's Catholic ethos and values. The school assembly seen during the inspection was outstanding, raising awareness of cultural diversity and promoting spiritual reflection and community cohesion. It provided students with an inspirational start to the day.

Most students enjoy school. Attendance is above the national average. Relationships between all groups are particularly impressive. The great majority of students behave well, although fixed term exclusions are a little higher than in similar schools. Students' have a good understanding of how to keep safe and their contribution to the school and wider community is impressive and preparing them well for adult life.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Students make satisfactory progress in relationship to their starting points. Those staying into Year 13 achieve in line with expectations in the majority of subjects. The pass rate at A level

is above the national average, but there are fewer A and B grades than the national average. Students' personal development and well-being are good. They make a good contribution to the whole-school community and they relish opportunities to take on responsibilities offered, and recognise the impact they have made on bullying prevention through student-led assemblies. Students are also very active in charity work and a significant number work as Red Caps on the diocesan pilgrimage to Lourdes.

The quality of teaching is satisfactory, with some good examples of effective practice. Students comment that in the good lessons 'you aren't made to think you have been pushed, but you realise that you've learnt a lot by the end of the lesson'. Assessment for learning and marking of work, including feedback to students, are not yet sufficiently precise or consistent across all subjects. This is one factor preventing more students from attaining the higher grades.

The satisfactory curriculum allows students to choose from a range of A-level and other courses available through the consortium arrangements with other providers. Lower retention rates in a minority of subjects within Year 12 indicate that some students staying on into the sixth form have not yet had opportunities to benefit from provision that specifically meets their potential. The sport specialist status has enabled students to have access to a wide range of extra-curricular provision, and the on-site farm adds to students' opportunities to explore environmental issues.

Students speak highly of the strong pastoral support they receive. The guidance to ensure that students embark upon courses appropriate for their needs and abilities is developing and is beginning to improve retention rates.

Leadership and management for the sixth form are satisfactory. Recent developments in monitoring, including student questionnaires on their lessons, are beginning to provide the opportunity for evaluation of provision and its impact. However, at present the monitoring and evaluation of students' progress and learning is no better than satisfactory because it is not sharp enough to secure a precise identification of the factors holding back better outcomes.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards, particularly of girls and students at the highest and lowest ends of the ability range, by ensuring that activities match closely all learners' needs.
- Improve school improvement planning by sharpening its focus on the few key priorities that will have a significant impact on raising achievement across the school.
- Sharpen monitoring and evaluation of attainment, progress and provision in the sixth form, in order to raise achievement and standards and to improve student retention.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Students' attainment is average when they enter Year 7. They make satisfactory progress as they move through the school, although it is better paced in Years 10 and 11 than in Years 7 to 9 because of a higher proportion of good and outstanding teaching. By Year 11, standards are average overall, as shown by the school's results in the GCSE examinations for the past three years. The school's improvement strategies have been especially effective in raising standards for those students who may be capable of gaining a GCSE grade C, but they have not yet had such a marked impact in ensuring all students do as well as they can. Groups that

are achieving less well are girls, particularly lower attaining girls, and students at the opposite ends of the ability range. The focus on middle ability students in Key Stage 4 and the relatively few learning support assistants are factors preventing the progress of other groups from being no better than satisfactory. All minority ethnic groups are making satisfactory progress. High quality teaching leads to standards that are well above the national expectations in physical education (PE), but the specialism is having only a satisfactory impact on students' overall achievement.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Behaviour, both in lessons and around the school, is good. Students are courteous to their peers, to staff and to visitors. Students assert, and school research clearly shows, that bullying is rare. A behaviour support unit is used appropriately to reduce the amount of poor behaviour in lessons. Students have a good understanding of different cultures. They are well prepared for living in our diverse society. The school has extensive sporting, cultural and charitable links with both the local and global communities. Students show a clear understanding of health and safety procedures in lessons and around the school. The school's sports specialism contributes much to the students' good healthy lifestyles. There are good opportunities for them to contribute to the school and wider community. For example, the school council provides an effective student voice. It plays a full part in school decision-making, including having a regular role in the appointment of members of the teaching staff. This, together with the many enrichment activities provided through the curriculum, helps students to develop self-confidence and other skills that prepare them well for their futures.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Predominantly solid teaching enables students to make satisfactory progress. Good relationships permeate lessons and set a positive climate for learning. Teachers share the learning objectives with students from the outset so they are generally clear about the purpose of the lesson. Good subject knowledge enables teachers to explain key ideas well, but they sometimes miss opportunities to extend students' thinking. In the best lessons, teachers use challenging questioning and a range of approaches that ensure students are active learners who share ideas and show initiative. Students clearly enjoy these lessons. In lessons that are no better than satisfactory, teachers tend to concentrate simply on getting information across to students who listen or make notes. When this happens, the pace of learning slows. In a minority of lessons, planning does not take sufficient account of students' prior learning to ensure that tasks match closely individuals' learning needs. Work in students' books shows a wide of variety in the standards teachers expect in terms of presentation and sometimes effort. Most students know what level or grade they are working at. In some subjects they know what they have to do to improve. For example in English, assessment for learning is strong. In a revision lesson, students made outstanding progress in improving their written analysis of poetry through active assessments of previous examination answers. Although the quality of marking is inconsistent, there is excellent practice in religious education and the expressive arts.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Good provision in the main school meets the needs and aspirations of students and their parents very well, particularly at Key Stage 4. An increasing emphasis on personalised programmes ensures that almost all students follow their preferred options. Triple science, French and German, and English language and literature are on offer for students pursuing academic qualifications. An increasing number of vocational courses, such as Business and Technology Education Council and college courses in construction, are improving opportunities for a wider range of studies for 14- to 19-year-olds. The school meets its statutory requirements with respect to citizenship and personal, social and health education. The school has six networked computer rooms and plans to make more effective and efficient use of them are in hand. At Key Stage 3, some opportunities are missed to take full advantage of new legislation that allow for a more flexible curriculum.

Large numbers of students take part in a wide range of enrichment activities including hobbies, educational trips and opportunities for the gifted and talented. Over 50 students participated in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award in the past academic year. Sports College status makes an outstanding contribution to curriculum provision within PE. At Key Stage 4, about half of all students take a sport-related GCSE, or its equivalent. The curriculum is responsive to the interests and needs of students. A core 'aesthetic' option, whereby students learn dance, trampolining and self-defence, has been introduced with a view to promoting long-term healthy lifestyles. About 50 students, who would not otherwise be involved in enrichment activities, do dragon boating and take part in regattas.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

At the time of the inspection, the school met all safeguarding, child protection and health and safety requirements. Indeed, it maintains them in an exemplary manner. Students feel safe around the school and in the local environment. Should they have a problem, they are confident about finding an adult to help them resolve it. Most parents are supportive of the school and appreciate the care that it provides for their children. However, a small minority raised concerns with the inspectors about their difficulties in communicating with senior leaders when they wish to discuss an issue. Attendance is good, supported by the work of the attendance officer who makes an outstanding contribution to maintaining it at this level. Academic guidance is improving and the school has a comprehensive programme to ensure that students know their targets and that these are reviewed and updated. Strong links with primary schools ensure a smooth transfer to Year 7. Students in Year 11 are equally well supported with specialist help and careers guidance.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Senior leaders have secured satisfactory improvement over the last three years. The increasing effectiveness of the sports specialism and the impressive increase in the proportion of students' gaining success in five A* to C grades at GCSE demonstrate the school's sound capacity to secure further improvement. However, progress on improvement points raised at the time of the previous inspection is less evident, and important outcomes and aspects of provision remain

no better than satisfactory. The school's improvement plan lists many actions that have the potential to improve its provision and students' achievements. However, it lacks a sharp focus on the most significant priorities that will make a difference, as well as clear timescales and measurable indicators of success to enable senior staff and governors to evaluate the success of these initiatives. Systems to monitor and evaluate the quality of the school's work are becoming more robust, although these are having a greater impact in some areas than others. The school sets targets and monitors progress towards academic achievement. However, the targets are not consistently ambitious enough to raise standards significantly.

A real strength of the school are the steps it takes, both within its own community and beyond, to promote community cohesion. Partnerships with other agencies, including local schools and colleges, are also good. The governing body provides valuable support to the school. It has played a major role in managing a budget deficit that has served as a barrier to greater improvement. Governors visit classrooms, attend monthly meetings and help develop the school's good links with the community it serves. Increasingly, the governing body is holding senior leaders to account for what they do, but the relatively slow pace of improvement against a number of longstanding areas for development shows that this role can be developed still further.

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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?	3	3
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	3	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	3	

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	2
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?	3	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	3
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?	3	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	3	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3	
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**

20 March 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Nicholas Breakspear School, Hertfordshire, AL4 0TT

Thank you for welcoming us to your school recently. We enjoyed our visit, especially our discussions with some of you and seeing you at work in lessons. This letter is to tell you our main findings. I hope that some of you will take the opportunity to read the full report.

The school provides you with a satisfactory standard of education. The satisfactory teaching helps you make the expected progress during your time at school, both in the main school and in the sixth form. The standards you attain are average but there are signs of improvement. For example, over the last three years increasing numbers of students gained five or more higher grade GCSEs, including English and mathematics, because of the additional support provided by the school. We think, though, that if work is matched more accurately to meet individual needs in lessons, some of you can do better than you currently do. You tell us that you enjoy school, particularly the great range of sporting and outdoor activities. The school's strong Catholic ethos supports your spiritual, moral, social and cultural development well. You make an effective contribution to the school, local and global communities and have a good understanding of how to keep safe. Staff give you good care, support and guidance and you tell us that you value their support. Most of you behave well.

Senior leaders are committed to securing a good education for everyone. We have asked them to do three things to improve the school and its standards further.

- Raise standards, particularly of girls and students at the higher and lower ends of the ability range, by making sure the work you get in lessons matches your individual needs.
- Improve school improvement planning so that it focuses on the smaller number of priorities that will have the greatest impact on standards and achievement.
- Improve systems for checking how effectively provision in the sixth form is raising achievement and standards and leading to more students completing Year 12.

You can help by always working hard, continuing to attend regularly and behaving well.

Yours faithfully

Anthony O'Malley

Her Majesty's Inspector