

Our Lady and St John Catholic Arts College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	119790
Local Authority	Blackburn with Darwen
Inspection number	327130
Inspection date	18 September 2008
Reporting inspector	Ruth James 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	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	930
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Canon Jude Harrison
Headteacher	Mrs Collette Gillen
Date of previous school inspection	1 October 2005
School address	North Road Blackburn Lancashire BB1 1PY
Telephone number	01254 59055
Fax number	01254 697308

Age group	11–16
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Introduction

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

Inspectors investigated the following issues:

- achievement and standards
- personal development
- the quality of provision and leadership and management.

Inspectors gathered evidence from data, visits to lessons, documentation, meetings with school staff, pupils and the chair of governors, and questionnaires completed by parents. 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.

Description of the school

Our Lady and St John Catholic Arts College is a mixed comprehensive school for 11 to 16-year-olds on the outskirts of Blackburn. It has specialist status in Arts and Applied Learning. The school is in an area of significant economic disadvantage. The number of students with special educational needs is high. An above average proportion of students receive free school meals. The proportions of students from minority ethnic backgrounds or who have a first language other than English are similar to the national averages.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Our Lady and St John is a good school. The Catholic ethos is particularly evident in the outstanding care, guidance and support the school provides. Leadership and management at all levels are strong and effective, and teaching is good. The curriculum is well matched to students' needs, enabling good progress to be made in personal development and the achievement of qualifications. Specialist status is used to good effect in a variety of ways which benefit students.

Students' attainment on entry to the school is typically slightly below average, with some variation from one year group to another. During Key Stage 3 progress is slower than in Key Stage 4, especially for girls, but overall, students make good progress during their time at the school. Boys and students in receipt of free school meals do particularly well, and progress is at least satisfactory for all groups of students including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Standards are broadly average. Just over half the students gained five or more GCSE grades A*-C in 2007 and this figure increased considerably in 2008. The proportion of girls who gain five or more grades A*-C including English and mathematics is lower than that for boys. A high percentage of students attain five or more GCSE grades A*-G. In the school's specialist areas of performing arts and vocational subjects results are very good.

Students' personal development is good. Students are proud of the school's reputation and have a strong sense of belonging. They are particularly appreciative of the support they receive from the school, and say so. These factors are endorsed by students' good attitudes to learning and their willingness to take up and apply new skills and learning techniques, though some girls could sometimes aim higher. Attendance is satisfactory overall. Most students attend regularly but the attendance of a small minority is poor. Relationships between students are good, as is their behaviour. Students have a good awareness of spiritual, moral and social issues. The school draws well on its attributes as a specialist arts college to raise students' confidence and self-esteem by interweaving dance, drama and the development of physical skills into other aspects of the curriculum. Students have a shrewd awareness of how to look after themselves and are keen to adopt safe practices. They say that they feel safe, secure and well cared for. The school has exemplary practice in this respect due to the dedicated work of staff and effective systems, such as the use of mobile phone texts to inform parents of absence and the use of closed circuit TV cameras. Students are encouraged to adopt healthy lifestyles and participate to a high degree in the diverse range of activities on offer outside the curriculum. Students' contribution to the community is outstanding through activities and responsibilities such as the school council, prefects' duties, arts based projects, multi-faith and charitable work. Students are well prepared for the world of work and for further study.

Teaching and learning are good and teachers use a range of strategies to motivate and engage students. This ensures that students respond well and enjoy their lessons. Teachers are knowledgeable, lively and enthusiastic and this also helps to encourage students to work effectively. Teachers have high expectations of behaviour, which are usually met. Most work is planned well and provides an appropriate level of challenge for the students, with lessons proceeding at an appropriate pace. Some good use is being made of expertise in the schools specialist areas to enhance teaching elsewhere. Targets are set for students in each subject and progress against these is monitored formally. Assessments are regular and thorough and the data is increasingly being used to address underachievement. However, there is limited

evidence of targeted intervention in lessons to ensure that girls are fully secure in their day-to-day learning.

The school provides outstanding care, guidance and support for its students. Arrangements to support those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, or who have concerns about their work or other problems, are excellent. The guidance offered is sensitive and very well coordinated. It is effective in raising students' self-confidence. Procedures for safeguarding students' interests are thorough and secure. Rigorous systems of monitoring underpin the school's knowledge of each student and ensure a quick response when students deviate from the expected pattern of progress and personal development. Students feel that they receive valuable support through the counselling and mentoring systems. This is a reflection of excellent team work between teaching and non-teaching staff and external agencies.

The school is developing an innovative curriculum in Key Stage 3 that is strengthening literacy, numeracy and technical skills and promoting students' confidence in their ability to work things out for themselves and become more independent. A significant feature, also applicable in Key Stage 4, is the emphasis on applying skills learnt in one subject to others; for example, using dance and drama as alternative approaches to reinforce a teaching point that students find hard to grasp. The school has invested heavily, to good purpose, in developing strategies that weave problem solving into work that crosses subject boundaries. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) as a tool to service other subjects is highly developed and very effective. The curriculum is rich in its diversity and in the range of opportunities it provides to prepare students of all abilities for employment and further education.

Leadership and management are good. A strong understanding of the social context of the locality is evident, with a genuine commitment to improving the life opportunities of all students. Senior leaders provide a clear sense of direction and implement well thought out strategies through highly capable middle leaders. The impact of effective management action can be seen in the improved results at Key Stage 4, improved attendance, reduced exclusions, and a range of curriculum developments to meet students' needs more effectively. Capacity to improve is good. Development plans at different levels show a sound understanding of issues to be addressed and appropriate action to tackle these. Areas for improvement identified at the last inspection have been dealt with effectively. The leadership team is focused on promoting personal development and raising standards. Examination and assessment data are used well to track students' progress, set challenging targets and to inform decisions. The school's contribution to community cohesion is good. Students from other faiths are welcomed, and a range of initiatives involving members of the local community help tolerance and understanding. The school itself is a safe and harmonious community. The school's self-evaluation is largely accurate. Governors are very supportive of the school and are fully involved in a number of aspects of its work.

What the school should do to improve further

- Further the achievement of girls through work to raise aspirations and more targeted interventions.
- Improve the attendance of the minority of students who do not attend regularly.

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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
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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
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	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
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	1
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	2
The attendance of learners	3
The behaviour of learners	2
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 learners' needs?	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	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
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
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

19 September 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Our Lady and St John Catholic Arts College, Blackburn with Darwen, BB1 1PY

Thank you very much for making us welcome when we inspected your school. We visited lessons, and talked to staff and students. You told us that you think yours is a good school and we agree. We found that the care, guidance and support the school provides are outstanding. We looked at the results of questionnaires sent in by your parents. Most of them are very pleased with the school.

Your behaviour in lessons and around school is usually good, and you have good attitudes to learning. The school looks after you extremely well. Your headteacher and other senior staff lead the school well and are constantly looking at ways of improving it. Your teachers work hard to encourage you, to make lessons enjoyable and interesting and to explain things clearly. The school offers you a good choice of courses at Key Stage 4. As a result of all these things, students at your school make good progress. Boys do especially well. Results in arts subjects, and vocational subjects such as business and ICT are particularly good.

Although yours is a good school we found that some things could be even better. We have asked your headteacher and staff to look at ways to help the girls to aim higher and to help them get even better results. A few of you have too many absences and we have asked the school look at more ways of improving attendance so that you do not miss valuable learning time.

We are sure that you will keep up your good work and we wish you every success for the future.

Yours sincerely

Ruth James

Her Majesty's Inspector