

St Gregory the Great VA Catholic Secondary School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	133644
Local Authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	328720
Inspection dates	14–15 January 2009
Reporting inspector	Cathie Munt 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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1040
Sixth form	170
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Miss Katherine Powley
Headteacher	Mr John Hussey
Date of previous school inspection	8 February 2006
School address	Cricket Road Cowley OX4 3DR
Telephone number	01865 749933
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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

This school of average size is oversubscribed. It serves a wide range of primary schools and has had three headteachers since moving to the present site in 2006. An interim headteacher was in post from September 2007 to Easter 2008. The current headteacher, seconded to the school in April 2008, was appointed to the post in November 2008. The organisation of leadership and management has undergone substantial changes during this period.

The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is much higher than the national figure at just under a half. The largest group is of Asian heritage, followed by pupils with various Caribbean heritages. There is a small proportion of students with various African heritages. The students speak almost 60 different languages between them. The proportion of students with statements of special educational needs, or who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, is greater than in secondary schools generally. Most of these students experience moderate learning difficulties or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. About 30 students are refugees.

The school has gained several national and local awards including Sportsmark and the Healthy School Award. It was designated a Specialist Music College in September 2007.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

St Gregory the Great Catholic School provides students with a satisfactory level of education. Under the immensely effective leadership of the new headteacher, this is an improving school. Good elements such as personal development and well-being; teaching, care, guidance and support in the sixth form; and links with other agencies, prepare the students effectively for their future education and for their entry into the world of work. Senior leaders, staff and governors, sharing a common view of the school's priorities, have addressed the major weaknesses noted in the last inspection and have focused successfully on raising standards. Senior leaders provide an effective role model in their use of data to monitor and evaluate the school's progress. These skills and practices are more variable at middle management level. Consequently, some departments are more effective than others at analysing and evaluating progress. Staff and pupils report that this is a happy school. A wind of change, sweeping through the school community, is creating a positive environment where students and staff alike can give of their best. 'Both my children feel inspired by the new Head', wrote a parent of students in Years 10 and 12. This comment reflects the views of the staff, students and governors and of the majority of those who replied to the questionnaire.

Standards are average throughout the school and students in all year groups generally make satisfactory progress in relation to their starting points. The school has developed suitable systems to track progress but the use of data to target underachieving pupils is inconsistent between subjects. An increasing amount of good teaching is taking place, but this is not consistent across all subjects. Good practice is not shared sufficiently. Consequently, teaching in the main school is satisfactory. Students' positive attitude to their work is helping them to make more rapid progress in those lessons that are well taught. Standards in the sixth form are average but show signs of improving because current teaching is good.

The school uses its specialist status appropriately to improve standards and support managers at all levels. Increased resources support teaching across the curriculum and make learning more fun. Work with local primary and special schools is helping their students to access a wider range of music and their staff to develop new teaching skills.

The school successfully celebrates its multi-ethnicity. Students get along together very well as a consequence of good spiritual, moral social and cultural development. Behaviour is good in most lessons and around the site. In a small number of lessons where teaching is uninspiring or behaviour management is weak, the behaviour of some students declines. The personal, social and health curriculum meets students' needs effectively, encouraging them to adopt healthy lifestyles. The gaining of the Sportsmark and Healthy Schools awards underlines the school's commitment to the students' well being. Community cohesion is effective at school and local levels but is insufficiently developed at national and global levels. Enterprise skills are not developed as well as they might be. Students feel safe in school and appropriate safeguarding procedures are in place. Although a very small number of parents and students voiced individual concerns, the majority reported that bullying is rare and is effectively dealt with by the school. There has been a substantial drop in the proportion of persistent absentees and attendance is now in line with that of similar schools nationally.

While there is room to improve standards across the curriculum, recently improved national test results, steady improvements in the progress and attendance of students and good teaching in the sixth form are evidence of the school's satisfactory capacity to improve further.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Standards in the sixth form are broadly average and the majority of students make at least satisfactory progress in their learning. The proportion of students attaining pass grades in A-level examinations is rising, due to improvements in the quality of teaching and more effective care, guidance and support. However, too few of the most able students achieve the highest grades. Suitable systems to track and monitor students' progress are in place. These enable teachers to challenge underperformance but the use of data is not yet fully embedded, leading to inconsistency between subjects. The students' personal development and well-being are good and their behaviour provides a fine model for the younger students. They enjoy their studies and appreciate the range of options provided by the successful partnership with other schools and the further education college. Attendance and progress are effectively monitored across the partnership.

The curriculum is satisfactory overall. An increasing range of AS- and A-level courses are on offer. Rightly, the school is developing the curriculum to broaden its appeal to students and to increase the proportion staying on into Year 13. Students wishing to improve on their GCSE performance have access to a narrow range of Business and Education Technology (BTEC) courses. The courses offered match these students' needs well. Senior leaders recognise that too few vocational courses are offered and suitable plans are in place for a 14-19 Diploma from September 2009.

Senior leaders and subject leaders have taken decisive steps to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and students recognise and value this. They enjoy their lessons because they are actively involved in their own learning and are encouraged to think for themselves. Consequently, teaching and learning in the sixth form are good. Students appreciate the support and good advice that they receive from staff.

Leadership and management of the sixth form are satisfactory. Self-evaluation is improving in its accuracy and actions to address issues for development are resulting in provision that is more effective. Leaders recognise that teaching and learning are not monitored rigorously enough in all subjects to ensure that improvements continue or are sustained. The capacity to improve is satisfactory.

What the school should do to improve further

- Share best practice in teaching to ensure a more even quality of learning across all subjects.
- Use available assessment data more consistently at subject level, to track and monitor all students' progress more effectively.
- Embed and disseminate the practices and analytical skills apparent within the senior leadership team to enable all middle managers to continue to develop their teams effectively.

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

Standards are broadly average by the end of Years 9 and 11. Observations of class work confirm this. GCSE results show a significant variation between subjects over the past three years.

However, the overall trend in English, mathematics and science throughout the school demonstrates a steadily improving pattern. In 2008, the proportion of students attaining five or more A* to C grades at GCSE (including English and mathematics) was broadly in line with the national figure and significantly exceeded the school's challenging target. Teachers in these subjects are using the updated assessment and tracking system well to monitor and support students' progress more closely than in the past. Recently, additional mentoring has successfully supported individual, underachieving students, but the school accepts that not enough has been done to raise achievement across the whole curriculum. Overall, the progress currently being made by all groups, including boys and girls, students with English as an additional language and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, is satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students are well mannered and show a mature understanding of right and wrong. Many enjoy school and take advantage of the opportunities offered through the house system, sports activities and other clubs.

Students say they feel safe in school and recent surveys confirm this. Most reported that there is very little bullying in school, although a few individuals, including a couple of parents, reported that some matters had not been dealt with as quickly as they would have liked. Fixed-term exclusions have declined significantly due mainly to the strategies employed by the 'Overcoming Barriers to Learning' (OB2L) department. Their work has also had a significant impact on raising standards. Students are aware of the need to eat healthily and all take part in regular physical activity. Many walk or cycle to school. They take appropriate care in practical lessons such as science. However, some found it difficult to articulate factors that contribute to keeping them healthy and safe outside school.

The school's contribution to promoting community cohesion is satisfactory. Students from different backgrounds work together harmoniously and there are strong links with the local community. They make a good contribution to events such as the Cowley Feast and have strong links with refugee communities. However, students show less understanding of the other communities of the United Kingdom, and international links are not well developed. The school has not conducted an evaluation of the impact of its duty to promote community cohesion.

Students' workplace skills are developing well. An effective work experience programme is complemented by relevant examples of work-related learning within the curriculum. However, enterprise education is not developed sufficiently.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Teachers have good subject knowledge and most plan their lessons well. However, examples of outstanding and good teaching and learning in the school are not shared widely enough. Consequently, the quality of learning is inconsistent between teachers and across subjects. Teachers use resources, including interactive whiteboards, effectively to stimulate students' interest and to support their learning. In an outstanding Year 9 English lesson on the 'pros and cons' of boxing, students thoroughly enjoyed being actively involved in the debate. They assessed the facts maturely and exchanged opinions sensibly. The teacher assessed their work

and responded flexibly so that each student knew what they needed to do to achieve the next steps in their learning. However, in some lessons, students do not participate sufficiently and teachers do not regularly check individuals' progress. One student rightly said, 'Lessons would be better if we were more actively involved'. Despite opportunities to develop expertise in applying assessment data in their planning, in too many lessons teachers do not match work well enough to the needs of all the students. Some students find the work too difficult and some find it too easy. The work of teaching assistants with students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities is mainly satisfactory. The school, rightly, is providing training to extend the skills of teaching assistants so that they become increasingly effective in all situations.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The school provides an improving range of subjects and activities matched to students' needs and interests, including those who speak English as an additional language. Senior leaders recognise that the majority of students have followed a largely traditional curriculum that will not meet their needs in the future. Rightly, they are developing the curriculum to redress this. Reviews in Years 7 to 9 have focused on improving students' skills across the curriculum. The implementation of the changes is proceeding too slowly. College-based courses in Years 10 and 11 are a positive factor in keeping some students involved in learning and developing a range of practical skills, for example young apprenticeships and catering courses. A well-planned, personal, social and health education programme makes an effective contribution to students' personal development, and is used to forge supportive links with some families. Students benefit from a sound range of extra-curricular and enrichment activities.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

Day-to-day pastoral care for students is good. Rigorous monitoring has resulted in a considerable improvement in attendance and has drastically reduced the number of exclusions. The poor attendance of a very small number of students remains an area of concern.

Safeguarding procedures comply with government requirements. Health and safety systems and child protection procedures are in place. Students at risk are identified quickly and supported effectively. As a result, students feel secure and know where to turn for help if necessary. Parents noted, and inspectors agree, that transition arrangements for Year 7 students are effective. A student who arrived after the start of Year 9 is said by her mother to have settled in quickly and be making good progress '...because of the support that she has had from staff'. Careers advice for students in Years 9 and 11 is good. Students feel they have a say in the running of the school through the school council. However, the impact of the school council's work is not yet sufficiently strong.

Support and guidance for students who find learning difficult are effective. The school provides good, focused support for students who have English as an additional language. It has developed appropriate procedures for tracking the academic progress of all students, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Some of these new systems are beginning to have an effect on standards. However, they are not yet consistently applied or monitored. Consequently, not all students are aware of their targets or what they need to do to improve further.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Under the dynamic leadership of the new headteacher the school community is developing a sound understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. His open management style empowers staff, students and governors, creating a strong sense of common purpose. A spirit of renewal is evident within the staff, who report that this is a happy place to work. A great many parents praised the positive ethos and the improved results. Frequent communications with parents, for example congratulating students on attendance or effort, are much appreciated. One wrote, 'The school should be commended on recent improvements. I believe morale has improved as has communication, with regular newsletters and an updated website'.

The relatively newly formed senior leadership team is developing an effective strategic overview and has responded positively to the wide range of support offered by the local authority. They work effectively as a team, supporting the headteacher in the job of raising standards and improving the quality of education for all. Some processes and procedures are relatively new and the monitoring and evaluation of their impact are not developed fully. The school is very clear that senior and middle managers have development needs and there are suitable plans to deliver individual and group training.

The impact of the school's specialism has been good in the short time that this has been in place. Subject leaders appreciate access to increased resources and administrative support as a consequence of specialist funding and report that this is enabling them to organise their departments more effectively. Managers are using the staff's expertise to the benefit of local schools. A senior leader's acting primary headship is an excellent example of supporting local partnership schools.

The school has collected the views of parents and students on a range of topics. Managers are alive to the need to continue to provide opportunities for student and parent voices to be heard. The school is working effectively to dismantle barriers to learning and has had significant success with keeping vulnerable students in school.

Governors have increased their understanding of their role and have undertaken a good range of training. This is enabling them to develop an appropriately strategic viewpoint and to ask the telling questions that hold the school to account.

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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	2
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	3	3
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	3	3
The attendance of learners	3	3
The behaviour of learners	2	2
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	2
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2	2

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	3	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	3	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	2	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	3	
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**

28 January 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of St Gregory the Great VA Catholic Secondary School, Cowley, OX4 3DR

Thank you for sharing your thoughts so honestly and politely during the recent inspection of your school. This is certainly an exciting time in the school's development. It is going through many changes, led by your inspirational new headteacher. Our main conclusion is that St Gregory's is a satisfactory school where you do reasonably well. However, your headteacher, the staff and governors want more for you. Their hard work is already improving important areas of the school's work, for example, the number of you who attend school more regularly than in the past. It is important not to miss school unless you really are too ill to attend.

There were many positive things about St Gregory's, including:

- good teaching and support in the sixth form
- good personal development and well-being
- how well you all get along with each other
- how diligent you are at helping to keep the school clean and tidy
- your behaviour when moving around the site and buildings and in most lessons
- the way that the school treats everyone equally
- the way staff work with different external groups to improve your education
- more regular communications between the school and your homes
- that you feel safe in school and you trust the teachers and support staff.

Suitable plans are in place to improve the curriculum, making it more appropriate for the twenty-first century. There is more to be done to improve business enterprise opportunities and to ensure that you are as familiar with national and world communities as you are with your more local ones. GCSE results improved a lot last year because of effective teaching that was well monitored. You did your bit by attending regularly, working hard and paying good attention to what you were told. Well done! Keep this up!

In order to continue to improve the quality of education, we have asked the school to ensure that:

- all teachers use the available assessment data in the same way to track and monitor your progress, so helping you make more rapid progress in your learning
- teachers share their good teaching skills with each other so that learning is good in all subjects
- subject managers help their staff to develop the skills and practices that have begun to make such a difference to standards, to the way your school is run and to how well you are taught.

Best wishes for your future.

Yours faithfully

Cathie Munt

Her Majesty's Inspector