

St Thomas More Catholic School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109698
Local Authority	Bedford Borough
Inspection number	356606
Inspection dates	8–9 February 2011
Reporting inspector	Alan Alder 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	13–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	900
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	300
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Christopher Donnellan
Headteacher	Joseph Richardson
Date of previous school inspection	14 November 2007
School address	Tyne Crescent Bedford MK41 7UL
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four additional inspectors. They observed 43 lessons, taught by 43 teachers. Meetings were held with groups of students, members of the school's staff, the Chair of the Governing Body and three other governors, and the Executive Principal. In addition, a telephone conversation was held with the School Improvement Partner. Inspectors observed the school's work, and scrutinised a wide range of documents including those relating to safeguarding, students' performance data, the school's records of lesson observations as well as action plans. Questionnaires were analysed from 92 parents and carers, 103 students and 52 members of staff.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at two of key areas:

- the progress that students make in science
- the progress made by students who have special educational needs and who receive additional support in school.

Information about the school

The school is of average size. The majority of students have previously studied at one of four middle schools. The headteacher, at the time of the inspection, had been in post for four weeks. The school is the lead school in the local federation of Catholic schools. The previous headteacher of the school is now the Executive Principal of the federation.

The proportions of students who are known to be eligible for free school meals, and of those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are both in line with the national average. However, there is a lower proportion who have a statement of educational needs than nationally. More than twice as many students are from minority ethnic groups and speak English as an additional language than is the case nationally.

The school's specialist subject area is the humanities. It has received a number of awards including the Most Improved School Award from the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, the Community Cohesion Gold Award, the Investors in People Award and Leadership Award, the International Award, and Healthy Schools status.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

1

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

1

Main findings

The school's overall effectiveness is outstanding. When students join the school in Year 9, they do so having reached standards that were below national averages in the national tests they took at the end of Year 6. By the end of Year 11, the standards they reach in their work are above average. That represents outstanding progress.

The quality of much of the school's provision is outstanding. Teaching is highly effective because lessons are well-planned and assessment is used, often very successfully, to check that students have understood the work and further explanation is provided if they have not. The care, guidance and support that students receive are exceptionally strong. This enables students to settle into school very quickly when they join in Year 9. There is very good support for those who are potentially vulnerable. Students who are underachieving are quickly identified and effective support is provided. In addition there is very thorough follow-up if the school has any concerns about how well different groups of students may prosper. The parents and carers of one group of students, for example, were less well represented at parents' and carers' evenings than those of the other groups. The school arranged a meeting with them in the town and as a result their attendance at parents' and carers' meetings improved and the students' attendance at school also improved.

The capacity for sustained improvement is outstanding. The school's leaders' understanding of the strengths of the school and the areas that require further development is accurately informed by very thorough monitoring and careful evaluations. Where improvements are sought, a very good range of approaches is in place to bring them about. The result is that the school has made strong progress since its last inspection. It has made good advances in the areas that were identified at that time as requiring improvement. Areas which were satisfactory are now developing well, or are strong. An example is the mathematics department which is undergoing a good rate of improvement. Attendance has also risen and is now above average. Less successful has been the development of the science department, where improvements, while now underway, are slower than those in mathematics. In science lessons, there is less of a focus on students understanding the work and more on simply getting the work done and the work is not always sufficiently engaging.

The specialist subjects make a strong contribution to the school's overall

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effectiveness. For example, teachers from the subjects concerned have provided training across the school to do with classroom management and different approaches to teaching. They have provided support to middle schools, for example for the teaching of gifted and talented students. The humanities subjects make a good contribution to students' academic achievement and there is a good take up of the humanities in the sixth form.

The governing body is highly supportive and challenging. Leaders are held strongly to account.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching in science by ensuring that:
 - there is greater focus on students understanding the work they are doing
 - teaching both challenges and stimulates students to a greater degree
 - the marking of students' work is more effective in helping them to improve it.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

1

Students make outstanding progress in their learning. Taking all students' best eight subjects, including English and mathematics, their attainment is above average. Based on all their subjects, it is exceptionally high. Current data provided by the school, based upon GCSE modular tests that are set and marked externally, show that progress is improving further. This includes mathematics, in which students are exceeding challenging targets, and to a lesser extent science. Lesson observations confirm this judgement. In addition, no group is underachieving in comparison to others. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, including those who have statements, make outstanding progress and are exceeding their targets. Students who speak English as an additional language receive very well targeted help with their English communication, whilst being successfully challenged in other academic subjects. In the best lessons, all groups of students make outstanding progress because their teachers are very alert to any issues there are about misunderstanding the work. They are quick to correct it. Students have a very good understanding of what is expected of them and what constitutes good work and they use this well during assessments of each others' work to point out where improvements can be made.

Students' behaviour is good. In lessons, it is an important contributor to their learning. Around school it is sensible, with the occasional controlled instance of minor boisterousness. Rates of exclusion are low and have fallen considerably since the last inspection. This is partly the result of better provision for those who have exhibited challenging behaviour; it enables them to understand how it should improve, whilst keeping them in school. A very high proportion of students say that they feel safe in school and inspectors saw no evidence to suggest otherwise. Students' take a keen interest in keeping themselves healthy and understand very well how to do this.

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Their preparation for future economic activity is outstanding because students reach high standards in basic skills and they learn to work extremely well both independently and in pairs and groups. The proportion of students who leave without going on to employment or training is well below the national average.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	2
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	1
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	1
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils' behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

How effective is the provision?

Teachers' subject knowledge is good and they use it to plan highly effective lessons. The objectives of the lessons are clear and unambiguous. This enables teachers to ask well-focussed and searching questions to check students' understanding. In the best lessons, impressive techniques are used to assess students' understanding. In one mathematics lesson, for example, all students used mini-white boards to display to the teacher their response to her questions. This enabled the teacher to adjust her teaching to remedy students' misconceptions. The strength of the technique was boosted by the teacher's insistence that all students respond. The next activity also enabled a relatively quick assessment of students' progress, to the same effect, and good learning resulted. Marking is highly effective in some subjects, but less so in science where suggestions for improvement are not always clear.

There are many opportunities for students to work collaboratively and they do so in a mature fashion, extending each others' knowledge whilst also articulating their own thinking and learning to work in consort with others. The climate for learning is good. Students are engaged well in lessons and their sensible behaviour means that work proceeds at a good pace. They understand what is expected of them. In one art

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

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lesson, students were invited to explain to the teacher how the teacher's own piece of work might be further developed; they did so sensibly and demonstrated their very good understanding of what constitutes outstanding practice. However, these approaches are not evident in all lessons. In a small minority of lessons, there is not sufficient emphasis on developing students' understanding, rather there is an emphasis simply on completing the work correctly. In such lessons, the assessment of understanding takes second place to overly directed advice on how to complete the task.

The curriculum makes a good contribution to students' learning and their personal development. There is special provision for those whose literacy and numeracy skills need rapid development when they join the school. There is a good range of courses that provide a balance between the academic and the vocational. Many students who speak English as an additional language are able to study their home language. There is good provision for those students whose interests and aspirations lie more in developing work-based skills than in more academic pursuits.

The care, guidance and support that students receive are highly effective. There is very close analysis carried out of the progress being made by students who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. The result is that those who receive additional support are making exceptional progress, for example in mathematics. In the Emmaus centre, the provision closely reflects the needs of individual students. Students receive very good support for the educational choices they make in Year 11. The work with some of the students whose circumstances make them potentially vulnerable is outstandingly effective. The work done to improve attendance is thorough.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	1
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	1
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	2
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

There are four main factors that result in leaders and managers being highly effective in their work. One is the strength of determination on the part of leaders that students should prosper both academically and in their personal development. The second is the accuracy of the monitoring procedures to identify where there are any relative shortcomings. The third is the highly effective means of providing support and challenge. The fourth is the high degree of accountability of those whose role it is to ensure that provision is at its best. The governing body is unusually influential. It is highly involved in the strategic direction of the school. It is

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a major influence on, for example, the federation arrangements and the plans to change the age of entry to the school from 13 to 11. Its work in challenging leaders about the academic standards reached by students is a powerful force for improvement. The governing body is also highly involved in ensuring that the school's excellent safeguarding procedures are fully in place and regularly and rigorously reviewed.

Much is done to ensure that there is equality of opportunity for students and an absence of discrimination. Leaders have established consultative panels with parents and carers from different ethnic groups to help to ensure that all students are well served by the school. Tailored guidance is provided to parents and carers on how to support their children's learning and they are kept well informed about the progress they make. Partnerships with other bodies, such as middle schools and other learning providers, social services and health professionals, are used well to bring about improvement to learning and to provide support for students who may need specialist advice or support. Community cohesion is outstanding. All faculties are required to promote it; there are easy and relaxed relationships between the different cultural groups in the school. There are strong links with schools overseas.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	1
Taking into account:	
The leadership and management of teaching and learning	1
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	1
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	1
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

Sixth form

Students make good progress in their academic work. Attainment is above average and improving. Half-termly monitoring of students' progress is carried out with rigour to raise academic standards further. This is followed up with academic mentoring. This is praised by students, who speak highly of their mentors. Students know their targets and what they need to do to achieve them. There are very good extra-curricular opportunities and very good opportunities for sixth form students to take

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responsibility. Attendance is closely monitored and rigorous actions are taken to ensure that it is good. There is good contact with parents and carers. The transition arrangements to help students move from main school to the sixth form are thorough, with parents and carers well involved and extensive advice and information available. The process enables students to settle quickly. The head of sixth form, regularly, samples the quality of the teaching. In addition, the performance of subjects in the sixth form is monitored and actions are taken to bring about improvement where required. This has resulted in good improvements. The curriculum is broad, with a range of both academic and more vocationally orientated courses.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	2
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	2
The quality of provision in the sixth form	1
Leadership and management of the sixth form	2

Views of parents and carers

Parents and carers are very supportive of the school. Two areas which parents and carers are less positive about are how the school helps them to support their children's learning and how it helps them to have a healthy lifestyle. Inspectors looked into these areas carefully. They found the school promotes healthy living extremely well and gives parents and carers good information about learning.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at St Thomas More Catholic School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 92 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 900 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	35	38	51	55	5	5	1	1
The school keeps my child safe	36	39	54	59	2	2	0	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	46	50	40	43	5	5	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	38	41	49	53	4	4	1	1
The teaching is good at this school	30	33	53	58	7	8	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	26	28	42	46	17	18	1	1
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	21	23	53	58	14	15	1	1
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	35	38	41	45	7	8	1	1
The school meets my child's particular needs	35	38	48	52	8	9	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	27	29	54	59	7	8	1	1
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	24	26	51	55	8	9	2	2
The school is led and managed effectively	27	29	56	61	7	8	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	41	45	46	50	4	4	0	0

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	59	36	3	3
Primary schools	9	44	39	7
Secondary schools	13	36	41	11
Sixth forms	15	39	43	3
Special schools	35	43	17	5
Pupil referral units	21	42	29	9
All schools	13	43	37	8

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2009 to 31 August 2010 and are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2009/10 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be. <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



10 February 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of St Thomas More Catholic School, Bedford, MK41 7UL

Thank you for being so welcoming when we visited your school recently. We enjoyed talking with you and found you to be helpful, polite and confident.

We judged that yours is an outstanding school. This is evident from the very impressive progress you make in your learning and in your personal development. Your school is settled, your behaviour is good. You respect each others' differences and get on well together. We were impressed by how well some of your teachers understand quickly where you may be having difficulty in a lesson and so are able to provide help. We found that you work well, both independently and in groups. The inspectors were pleased to note that your attendance has improved and is above average for your age group.

Your school has developed good ways to enable you to settle quickly when you change from middle school, or go into the sixth form. It provides very good support for those of you who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

One of the reasons for your school's strength is the quality of leadership, including that provided by the governing body. Your school's leaders have a very strong commitment to help you prosper in your learning and as people.

We have asked the school to improve the way in which you are taught science. While there is some improvement evident, there is more to do. We suggest that teaching in science should challenge you more, focus a little more on developing your understanding as well as your knowledge, and give you clearer advice in marking. You can help improve your learning even further by continuing to ensure that your attendance continues to improve.

Yours sincerely

Alan Alder
Her Majesty's Inspector (on behalf of the inspection team)

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