

St Alban's Catholic High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	124864
Local Authority	Suffolk
Inspection number	340677
Inspection dates	25–26 November 2009
Reporting inspector	John Mitcheson 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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1000
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	191
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Paul McGrath
Headteacher	Dennis McGarry
Date of previous school inspection	26–27 February 2007
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three additional inspectors. The inspectors visited 30 lessons and held meetings with the chair of governors, senior and middle leaders and two groups of students. They observed the school's work and looked at a range of documentation, including 138 questionnaires from parents and carers.

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

- the reasons for the dip in student performance in 2008
- whether teaching meets the needs of all learners, including the most able students capable of attaining the very highest grades
- students' attendance and whether rates have improved since the last inspection
- the school's second specialism and its impact on the school and its community
- other improvements and the school's capacity for further improvement.

Information about the school

St Alban's Catholic High School is an average sized secondary school serving students from a wide area of south and north Suffolk. The majority of students are White British although the percentage of students from minority ethnic backgrounds has risen in recent years to around 35%. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, including those with a statement is below the national average. The school has held specialist college status in technology for a number of years and added a second specialism for special educational needs inclusion – Cognition and Learning in 2008. Following the last inspection in 2007, the school was re-inspected in 2008 as part of Ofsted's study to pilot new inspection arrangements.

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

This is an outstanding school. Highly effective leadership and management by the headteacher has, over a number of years steered the school into a position of sustained strength. Students feel very safe, valued and thrive in the rich learning environment provided for them. The school's strong Catholic ethos permeates all aspects of school life. This is most evident in the ways in which students develop good relations with their peers, teachers and support staff, respect one another and show care and consideration for others. Students' outstanding attitudes and behaviour underpin the school's positive ethos and this, combined with good and often exceptional teaching, leads to outstanding achievement and consistently high standards.

It is a highly inclusive school that places the promotion of equality of opportunity at the heart of all of its work. The school's new specialism in inclusion is making an outstanding contribution to this by ensuring that students and parents from a diverse range of backgrounds are becoming increasingly involved in the life of the school. This is making a significant contribution to promoting community cohesion, which is good. One of the key reasons why the school is so effective is astutely summed up by one student who told inspectors, 'The school's strong point is treating everyone as an individual.' The outstanding care, guidance and support provided ensures that all individual students are welcomed into the school, including those that feel vulnerable, have special educational needs including physical disabilities, or face challenging circumstances. Support from form tutors, teachers and student support managers, and a wide range of external partners, combine to provide outstanding pastoral care for students.

Teachers' assessments at the end of Key Stage 3 show that students achieve exceptionally well. Progress slows in Key Stage 4 but the majority of students go on to attain results that are consistently above the national average. Standards declined slightly in 2008 mainly due to staffing issues in some subjects and changes made to course requirements in mathematics and science which resulted in some students underachieving. Immediate and decisive action taken by senior leaders to halt this decline led to a return to exceptionally high standards this year. The school's focus on meeting the needs of every individual student means that the performance of all groups is equally as high. Specialist targets for the percentage of students attaining five or more A* to C grades including English and mathematics were met this year. The school came close to meeting challenging targets in science and mathematics but not in technology.

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Students' progress is good because the quality of teaching is usually good or outstanding. Teachers' detailed subject knowledge, positive relations with students and high expectations combine to produce well planned lessons that challenge them to work hard and achieve their very best. Good assessment procedures provide teachers with a clear understanding of how well students are progressing and helps them to identify those at risk of not meeting their targets. The best lessons achieve a suitable balance of teacher-led and independent learning tasks, with opportunities for students to evaluate how they and others are progressing, but this is inconsistent. Marking praises students' work but it does not always let them know how well they are progressing towards their personal targets or refer to GCSE criteria so that students understand what is required of them in examinations.

A broad range of GCSE and vocational courses and a broad range of enrichment opportunities contribute towards an outstanding curriculum that meets the needs of all students. They all study Religious Education and experience a number of enrichment days that provide a good insight into the different cultures, beliefs and opinions of others. This adds significantly to their spiritual, moral, social and cultural education, which is outstanding. Overall attendance that was satisfactory at the time of the last inspection has improved and is now good. Work experience and a thorough grounding in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) ensure that students acquire the necessary skills and attributes needed to secure their economic well-being. The vast majority of them progress into the sixth form. Students adopt a range of responsibilities and make an outstanding contribution to school life. They lead healthy, active lives but half of all students surveyed do not agree that school helps them to be healthy.

Senior leaders know the school very well. When weaknesses are revealed, decisive action is taken to remedy them. This shows the school's outstanding capacity to make further improvements. The headteacher's vision for the school is clearly expressed in detailed development plans. Governors make an outstanding contribution to the work of the school. All statutory duties, including safeguarding are fully met, its strategic development clearly planned and they provide rigorous support and challenge for the headteacher.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Accelerate students' learning and the progress they make by:
 - providing students with regular, day to day feedback on how well they are progressing against their personal targets
 - achieving a better balance of time spent on teacher-led activities, learning independently and in self-assessment by students
 - ensuring that teachers' marking in Key Stage 4 makes explicit reference to GCSE grade criteria so that students know how well they are doing and understand fully what they are expected to know in order to achieve their expected grades.

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Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

1

By the end of Year 9 students attain standards that are well above local and national averages and have been for the last three years. This year, almost 90% of Year 9 students attained the expected levels in English and mathematics. Similar results were attained in science and ICT. Standards are also consistently high in Key Stage 4. The percentage of Year 11 students attaining five or more GCSE A* to C grades fell slightly in 2008 but improved this year to 75%. Significantly, the gap between girls' attainment and that of boys has been eliminated. The proportion of more able students attaining A* and A grades has been below national averages in the past but this improved significantly this year. Results in English and, to a lesser extent, mathematics are exceptionally high, helping to meet the aspirational targets the school set itself this year. Fewer students pursue vocational awards but those who do achieve well in ICT and in business studies. Results in health and social care fluctuate from year to year.

In lessons, good teaching in a positive, caring environment, and excellent student attitudes and behaviour, contribute towards students' outstanding achievement. Most students thoroughly enjoy learning, are eager to answer questions and contribute their ideas. The quality of students' learning is good rather than outstanding because progress slows in some lessons and students do not always have enough opportunities to review their own learning. The recent appointment of an officer to monitor attendance and encourage students to attend more regularly is leading to improvements. Students are tolerant, respectful of each other and say that when bullying occurs it is tackled promptly by adults. Exclusions are rare and incidents of racism are very low. Students volunteer to represent the school in sport and music, as school councillors, 'study buddies' and prefects.

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	1
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils' behaviour	1
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
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	1

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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contribute to their future economic well-being Taking into account: Pupils' attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

How effective is the provision?

Teachers' good subject knowledge and high expectations provide most students with suitably challenging activities and specialist advice on how well they are doing. They ask probing questions to gauge students' understanding, manage behaviour well and help to make learning enjoyable for students. Most teachers deploy their teaching assistants so that specific students receive good one-to-one support. In a small minority of lessons, teachers talk for too long. This limits the pace of learning and some students lose interest, resulting in some minor off-task behaviour. The quality of presentation in students' books varies considerably.

Collaborative working with other schools and colleges is leading to further innovation and more choice for students in Key Stage 4. Specialist status in technology has helped to firmly establish the Arkwright Scholarship through Arkwright Foundation sponsorship. Students receive good guidance and information to help them make the best choices for future courses and careers. A small number of Polish students that have English as their second language receive invaluable care and support from Polish-speaking support assistants who mentor them and also liaise with their parents to ensure they attend regularly, integrate and achieve well. Gifted and talented students benefit greatly from additional enrichment activities to extend their learning but not all lesson planning includes a sufficient range of activities to extend the most able.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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

How effective are leadership and management?

A proven headteacher, ably supported by his team of senior leaders demonstrates outstanding leadership. His commitment to continued improvement and his strategic vision for the school is a key element of the school's outstanding effectiveness. Governors have taken steps to ensure that senior leadership responsibilities are evenly distributed and have strengthened the school's capacity further by making

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new appointments to the senior leadership team. Middle managers monitor students' progress through interim reports to ensure that they remain on track to achieve their targets. The school has made excellent progress in promoting community cohesion but its work in this area is good rather than outstanding because it has not evaluated its full impact.

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	2
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	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

Sixth form

Outcomes for students by the end of Year 13 are outstanding and have been for a number of years. Under the guidance of the outstanding leadership the vast majority of students attend regularly, complete their studies successfully and progress on to higher education. Based on their starting points, the majority of students make outstanding progress and attain very high standards. Results in 2009 were well above national expectations and exceeded the challenging targets the school set for itself. The proportion of students attaining A to C grades in Advanced level examinations increased to over 75%. The quality teaching matches the rest of the school; lessons are mostly good and outstanding. Lessons are well planned, with suitably challenging tasks designed to stimulate and engage all students in debate. Students benefit from having their own dedicated ICT facility to aid their learning. Regular assessments are incorporated into lesson planning and teachers' questioning so that teachers can check students' understanding and their progress. Highly motivated students capitalise on good study habits developed in earlier key stages; they are able to work independently for extended periods of time and participate fully in class discussion and debate.

Partnerships with other local schools offer students an outstanding curriculum; an extensive range of Advanced level courses are complemented by an Assessment and

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Qualifications Alliance Baccalaureate, foundation studies, critical thinking and a range of enrichment activities. Students with special educational needs including physical disabilities are welcomed into the sixth form. Students say that they feel cared for, valued and that they are kept safe. They appreciate the good guidance and advice offered to help them with their applications to university. In general, they lead healthy lifestyles and engage in a number of enrichment activities. Their views are given high priority through the sixth form council and a large proportion of students make a significant contribution to school life as prefects, site stewards and mentors to younger students.

These are the grades for the sixth form

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

Views of parents and carers

Questionnaires show that the school engages with parents and carers very well and, consequently, school leaders enjoy their overwhelming support. The vast majority of parental responses confirmed their child's enjoyment of school and that they feel well prepared for their future lives. A minority of parents expressed concerns about students' behaviour but inspectors found this to be exceptionally good in lessons and around the school.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at St Alban's Catholic High 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 138 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1000 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	61	44	67	49	8	6	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	58	42	72	52	7	5	0	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	44	32	79	57	10	7	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	49	36	75	54	10	7	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	52	38	73	53	4	3	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	41	30	80	58	11	8	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	20	14	91	66	13	9	5	4
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)	31	22	86	62	7	5	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	47	34	75	54	7	5	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	50	36	63	46	8	6	3	2
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	26	19	88	64	8	6	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	51	37	73	53	7	5	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	70	51	58	42	8	6	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 inspected between September 2007 and July 2008

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	39	58	3	0
Primary schools	13	50	33	4
Secondary schools	17	40	34	9
Sixth forms	18	43	37	2
Special schools	26	54	18	2
Pupil referral units	7	55	30	7
All schools	15	49	32	5

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 were reported in The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2007/08.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

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:	<p>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.</p> <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.



27 November 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of St Alban's Catholic High School, Ipswich IP4 3NJ

We visited your school this week and found that it provides you with an outstanding education. Thank you for helping us to come to this judgement, especially those of you who met with inspectors to share your views and let them know about life at St Alban's. Throughout the visit, you behaved exceptionally well and made us feel most welcome.

We found that standards in your school are consistently very high. Really good teaching helps you to make good progress and attain results that are consistently well above those achieved in other similar schools nationally. You told us that you feel well-cared for and enjoy school very much. We were particularly impressed with the care, consideration and respect you show towards each other and that students from a diverse range of backgrounds, with different needs and interests, work together so well. We found most aspects of your school to be outstanding, but noted that the quality of teaching and learning could be improved even further. So we have asked your teachers to make the following improvements:

- Accelerate your learning by:
 - providing you with regular, day to day feedback on how well you are doing against your personal targets
 - achieving a better balance of time spent listening to your teachers, working independently and assessing your own progress
 - ensuring that teachers' marking refers to GCSE grades so that you know how well you are doing and understand fully what you are expected to know in order to achieve your expected grades.

You have an outstanding headteacher who leads your school extremely well. You can help him by asking your school council to share your views on other improvements that could be made to make it even better than it is. Best wishes for the future.

Yours sincerely

John Mitcheson
Her Majesty's Inspector.

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