

St Paul's Catholic School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110517
Local Authority	Milton Keynes
Inspection number	325164
Inspection dates	10 September 2008
Reporting inspector	Lynn Bappa

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)	1678
Sixth form	376
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr M Auckland
Headteacher	Mr M Manley
Date of previous school inspection	28 September 2005
School address	Phoenix Drive Leadenhall Milton Keynes MK6 5EN
Telephone number	01908 669735
Fax number	01908 676206

Age group	11-18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors. The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school. They looked particularly at the impact of specialist status on standards, achievement and the curriculum; the opportunities provided for students to work independently; provision in the sixth form and the effectiveness of senior managers at sustaining the excellent grades received in the last inspection. The inspectors met with staff and students and scrutinised parents' questionnaires. They observed parts of several lessons in both the main school and the sixth form and looked at school documentation, including self-evaluation. The inspectors did not investigate other aspects of the school's work in detail, but found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified. These assessments have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

St Paul's is a larger-than-average Catholic school and the only faith-based school in Milton Keynes. The percentage of students entitled to free school meals is lower than average, although students come from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds. Nearly 40% of students come from a variety of minority ethnic backgrounds, a much higher proportion than is usually found. The percentage of students with learning difficulties or disabilities is just below average although the proportion with statements of educational need is higher than found nationally. St Paul's became a specialist science college in 2003 and has just been granted a second specialism of languages. It is also a training college. It has provision for 10 visually impaired students and 21 places for those with Asperger's Syndrome or Autistic Spectrum Disorders.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

St Paul's is a very special place where students are encouraged, in the school's own words, 'to do the best that is possible'. It provides them with an outstanding education, both academically and personally. Parents agree with inspectors. 'The school pushes the children hard but fairly and expects them to aim high', wrote one parent, summing up the views of many. As a result, students of all backgrounds and abilities achieve extremely well from Years 7 to 11. Their prior attainment when they join the school is broadly average and their results in national tests in Year 9 have been well above average, with year-on-year improvements, for several years. The school's current tracking indicates that students' progress in this academic year is similarly high. The proportion of students achieving five or more A* to C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics, has been well above average for several years and is also improving. The school regularly exceeds its own challenging targets. Less able students and those with moderate learning difficulties also make excellent progress. As one parent commented, 'My child has special needs and the support she has received is excellent. She is making excellent progress and has been integrated very well socially as well.' The percentage of students achieving five or more A* to G passes at GCSE is high and almost everybody leaves the school with at least one qualification. Visually impaired students, those with autistic spectrum disorders and students for whom English is an additional language achieve as well as their classmates because of excellent support from both staff and fellow students.

The school is rightly proud of its science and languages college status and this adds a further ingredient to a rich mix of opportunities to both students and the local community. The curriculum meets statutory requirements and promotes high levels of achievement and enjoyment. It offers an imaginative range of courses with considerable choice and flexibility in both key stages. The school has made a good start towards offering the new Key Stage 4 diploma qualifications. Standards in science have steadily improved since specialist designation. The number of science-related courses on offer has increased and take-up rates are growing. Students in Years 10 and 11, for example, can take a course in horticulture which they can continue at a higher level at a local college. During discussions, students on this course showed very high levels of enthusiasm and commitment to their work. Extra subjects, such as astronomy and Latin, are available to meet the needs of higher attaining students. In order to provide continuity of learning and extra support, a specialist in primary education has just begun to teach a group of lower attaining students in Year 7. The school is rightly reviewing the curriculum in Years 7 to 9, with a focus on broadening the range of cross-curricular, investigative work. The school also provides a wide range of very good opportunities for people in the local community, including holiday Spanish and access courses for potential science technicians. Although the school has only just received specialist languages status, work has already begun on broadening the curriculum and widening the range of opportunities in this area. It is planned to introduce Russian, for example, as well as support for German lessons in local primary schools.

Students' personal development and well-being are excellent throughout the school and they are very well prepared for the next stage of their lives. Students thoroughly enjoy school and make the most of the opportunities they are given. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are outstanding and reflect the Catholic ethos of the school. This is a very caring school where students trust the adults around them and grow in confidence and self-esteem. They show high levels of emotional health and participate enthusiastically in a wide range of sporting activities. Although a very small number of parents expressed concerns over behaviour, inspectors judged that students behave extremely well, both in lessons and around the school.

St Paul's is a place where every child really does matter. The school provides a caring and supportive atmosphere where students, whatever their background, can flourish as individuals. There are many adults to turn to for help. Child protection procedures are robust and comply with government requirements. Procedures for promoting good attendance are very thorough and students' attendance is well above the national average. The school works very closely with parents and other external agencies to ensure that all students receive excellent levels of support. Careers advice is effective and students are well equipped to make informed choices about their future education and employment. Academic monitoring is good and improving. Although teachers make good use of assessment data to set targets, there is scope to do more to enable students with learning difficulties to understand the progress they are making when they leave Year 9, when their targets are set as Key Stage 3 levels, and begin Year 10 when grades are used.

Most teaching is good, and a growing proportion of it is outstanding. Classroom relationships are excellent, lessons are interesting and students feel that teachers work hard to help them succeed. Students are consequently extremely well motivated and this, combined with the good teaching they receive, means that they make outstanding progress. Students are set challenging targets and are monitored closely. As one student commented, 'Teachers will not let you drop down.' Attitudes to learning from students of all ages and abilities are excellent and these, together with the good teaching and the rich and interesting curriculum, ensure that students make outstanding levels of progress. The emphasis on learning skills is beginning to provide a strong base for students' academic success. Teachers make very good use of talk partners, for example, to help students develop their ideas before sharing them with the rest of the class. Senior leaders have rightly identified, however, that the teaching of these skills is not yet consistent across the school. In some lessons, for example, teachers have not struck the right balance between enabling students to learn independently and providing the right amount of support for that to happen, particularly for those who find learning difficult.

At the heart of the success of this school are the outstanding leadership and management at all levels. The excellent leadership of the headteacher and the senior team ensures that there is no complacency: this is a school where everybody constantly strives to do better. Professional development is highly valued and the school makes good use of its status as a training college. Initiatives are welcomed and talents are nurtured. Management of specialist college status is excellent and has had a positive impact on resources such as the provision of interactive white boards in every classroom. Links with parents, the Church and the local community are very good. The school knows itself very well, has made significant improvements since the last inspection and has excellent capacity to improve even further. Governance of the school is excellent.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

The sixth form has improved since the last inspection and is now outstanding. Numbers are growing rapidly and the great majority of students complete their courses. Students enter Year 12 with standards that are below those typically found nationally. Despite this, the pass rate is above average at nearly 100% and the percentage of students achieving grades A and B is growing steadily year by year and is now almost at the national average. The school is aware that it needs to do more to increase this proportion of the highest grades. Achievement in vocational courses is outstanding and all students either go to university or enter further education, training or employment. This is the result of good teaching, an excellent curriculum and students' own very positive attitudes towards their learning. The curriculum is very well adapted to meet individual needs and interests. New courses have been successfully introduced in recent years and there are good links with local schools and colleges. Students participate eagerly in extra-curricular activities and fund-raising events. Teaching is good and the school's monitoring files show that it is getting better. Senior leaders have rightly identified that some of the more inexperienced teachers need more training on how to support higher attaining students to gain more grades A and B and this is a focus for professional development. Lessons are lively with good levels of challenge. In a Year 13 biology lesson, for example, students made models of the different ways in which viruses enter the body in order to develop their understanding before being allowed to check their work against a textbook. Teachers know their students well. Realistic but challenging achievement targets are set and students say that they feel very well supported and that teachers ensure that they are well able to cope with the transition from Year 11 into Year 12.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the balance between enabling students to learn independently and providing the right amount of support for that to happen.

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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?	1	1
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?	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1	1
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	1	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	1	
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	1	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interest of learners?	1	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	1

¹ Grade 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.

All white boxes must be completed. The grey boxes are used wherever the inspection team has sufficient evidence to come to a secure judgement.

² IE - denotes that insufficient evidence was available to inspectors for a judgement to be made.

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	1	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	1	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1	
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



Letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection.

23 September 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of St Paul's Catholic School, Milton Keynes, MK6 5EN

Thank you for the warm welcome that you extended to us during the recent inspection of your school. We very much enjoyed discussing with you the work that you were doing and hearing your opinions of the school. I would particularly like to thank the Year 10 students who invited me to look at their allotment - I think most expert gardeners would be envious of the quality of the vegetables you grow! We thought you would like a summary of the inspection findings, but also hope that you will take the opportunity to read the whole report. We think your school is outstanding and you, in no small way, help to make it such a brilliant place to be. The thing that impressed us most is that, no matter whether you find learning easy or difficult, or whatever your background, the school values you and helps you to achieve the best you can. As a result, you work very hard and enjoy learning. You do very well in your tests and examinations and make excellent progress during your time in the school. We were also impressed by the excellent contribution that the science college makes to your education and hope that this will be further extended now that the school has also become a languages college. Your school is extremely well led by the headteacher and his management team. The teachers and other adults who work at the school care about you, support you well and work hard to make sure that you are safe. You all get on together extremely well and your attendance is good. Although some of your parents worry that behaviour is not as good as it could be, we thought it was excellent. You believe that bullying and racism are dealt with well and we agree with you. We were impressed by your level of involvement in a wide range of activities outside the normal day.

Outstanding schools are not necessarily perfect. The senior leaders and all staff will be working hard to improve the quality of teaching so that more of it is excellent. They will focus on developing your learning skills more consistently across all your subjects. You can help them in this by continuing to work hard and by asking teachers when you do not understand so that they can help you to become more independent.

Yours sincerely

Dr Lynn Bappa
Lead Inspector