

Saint Mary's Catholic School

Windhill, Bishop's Stortford, CM23 2NQ

Inspection dates 10–11 October 2012

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	Outstanding	1
Achievement of pupils		Outstanding	1
Quality of teaching		Outstanding	1
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Outstanding	1
Leadership and management		Outstanding	1

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school.

- The school's motto: 'achieving excellence for all' has become a reality at this outstanding school. Endeavour, trust and kindness prevail.
- Leadership at all levels ensures an unyielding pursuit of excellence. Students, staff and parents are proud to be associated with this school.
- Students' behaviour is exemplary. They are courteous, polite and respectful to each other and staff at all times. Students thoroughly enjoy school, are happy and feel very safe. Students support each other's learning without question
- Achievement is outstanding in all key stages. All groups of students, including disabled students and those who have special educational needs, make excellent progress.
- Academic standards are high and have been so over a number of years.
- The overall quality of teaching is outstanding. Teachers' expert subject knowledge inspires students to be highly motivated, enthusiastic learners.
- Lessons are planned and prepared in detail. Occasionally, activities are not accurately enough matched to what students already know and can do, or do not promote independent learning skills as well as possible.
- School leaders regularly analyse and review school performance. Improvements to the quality of teaching and the subjects on offer are systematically planned and implemented. The aspirational leadership of teaching and learning has resulted in increasing numbers of outstanding lessons across the school.
- The variety of subjects on offer ensures that students' ambitions, needs and interests are well met. Numerous trips and visits connected to different subject areas take place throughout the school year. These are popular with the students and further extend their learning.
- The governing body successfully shares responsibility for planning and driving improvements.
- The sixth form is outstanding. Achievement is rising due to skilful teaching and highly personalised support for students.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed teaching and learning in 31 lessons taught by 30 teachers, of which 15 were joint observations with senior leaders.
- There were 89 responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) which were analysed during the inspection.
- Inspectors held meetings with staff, students and the Chair of the Governing Body. They also met a representative from the local authority. They observed the school's work and looked at a range of documentation, including school and subject improvement plans, school policies, assessment data, safeguarding documentation and anonymised performance management records.

Inspection team

Hilary Macdonald, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Trevor Riddiough

Her Majesty's Inspector

Karen Roche

Additional Inspector

Martin Wyard

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Saint Mary's Catholic School is similar in size to the average secondary school. The majority of students who attend the school are Catholic and some travel considerable distances to attend.
- The proportion of students who are known to be eligible for free school meals and for whom the school receives additional income (the pupil premium) is well below average.
- The proportion of students supported through school action, school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is well below average.
- Most students are White British. Other students come from a range of heritages. The proportion of students who speak English as an additional language is lower than average.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for attainment and progress.
- The school holds a number of awards and quality marks, including the Eco Council Award, the National Association for Able Children in Education Challenge Award and the Customer Service Excellence Award.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the proportion of outstanding teaching by:
 - providing activities in lessons which better meet the needs of students of different abilities
 - providing more opportunities for students to develop skills to support independent learning.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is outstanding

- Students start at the school with attainment above national averages. By the end of Key Stage 4, the attainment of all groups of students is very high in comparison with national averages. In 2011, the most recent year for which comparative data is available, 78% attained five GCSEs at A* to C, including English and mathematics.
- Students make good and rapid progress in individual lessons, and this is sustained over time. This is reflected in data which demonstrate that the proportion of students making or exceeding expected progress in mathematics and English in 2011 and in 2012 is high when compared with national averages.
- Disabled students, those who have special educational needs and those known to be eligible for additional funding, progress with equal success alongside their peers. Carefully tailored support packages, thoughtful deployment of additional adults to support students' learning and emotional needs, as well as high quality guidance and advice, are provided.
- Priority is given to developing students' literacy skills so that learning and progress in all subjects are enhanced. Younger students learn to express themselves in writing at length, including using subject-specific and technical vocabulary. This groundwork allows them to flourish as they move through the school, where they tackle reading and recording complex subject matter with skill and confidence.
- Students in the sixth form make outstanding progress. The school's accurate analysis of this rapid progress is confirmed through sixth form lesson observations. Achievement in the sixth form is high. In 2011, 58.5% attained A or B grades. Students are very well prepared for the next stage in their education, training or employment with support provided individually to each student.
- Students throughout the school make a remarkable contribution to each other's learning and progress. Without exception, lesson notes are shared and peer support is given freely. Students say, 'By sharing our notes and ideas, we cover more ground and learn more of the critical things quickly.' Parents and carers who expressed a view are overwhelmingly positive about the progress their children are making.

The quality of teaching is outstanding

- Teaching is consistently good and much is outstanding. This was endorsed by observations during the inspection, the school's own records of teaching quality, and by students. One group of students summed this up saying, 'Often lessons are practical and fun; we are treated as adults and work in a relaxed atmosphere. In these lessons we learn a lot.'
- Teachers have high expectations of their students, which encourages them to achieve and progress well. Outstanding teaching is supported by teachers' strong subject knowledge, especially in the sixth form. Teachers provide much constructive feedback to students verbally and in written marking.
- Teachers plan lessons carefully. Sometimes, however, lessons commence from the same starting point for all students, which results in a minority of students making less progress than they

could as tasks are excessively or insufficiently challenging.

- Lessons are interesting and capture the students' enthusiasm well. In most lessons, students are given opportunities to discuss their thinking and learning with a partner, to work independently and also as part of a group. In this way, students provide valuable support to each other and further develop their independent learning skills. Occasionally, though, opportunities are missed for students to take responsibility for their own learning.
- Students know what they are aiming for in terms of GCSE or end of key stage grades and levels. Progress towards their targets is closely monitored by the teachers, senior leaders and the students themselves. When necessary, additional help is provided such that it is rare for any student to fall behind. If a student meets their target early, it is renegotiated and a further challenge set.
- Disabled students and those who have special educational needs are supported well by their teachers and teaching assistants. Staff enable students to make progress across all subjects. Discussions are held between school staff and the family, and expert help, matched to each student's particular needs, is provided.
- Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are promoted well. For example, in a Year 9 music lesson, students composed music and lyrics on the theme of 'war protest'. In a Year 13 business studies lesson, students discussed the moral principles of acceptable and unacceptable business behaviour and, in an assembly, a charitable project was launched aimed at sharing gifts at Christmas.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

- Students' attitudes to learning are exemplary. Their behaviour in lessons and around the school is, at all times, calm considerate and courteous. Sixth form students act as mentors to younger students. However, everyone takes a role in caring for each other, and the wider community.
- Students take pride in their work and in their school. For example, female students are articulate about the heritage of the school and know that their uniform long skirt is a result of the nuns' legacy.
- Students are confident that they are safe in school. They are fully aware of different possible forms of bullying, including cyber, racist and homophobic bullying, although no students were able to recall a time when any of these occurred. Parents and carers agree that their children are safe in school.
- Students confirm that expectations for high standards of behaviour are relentlessly applied. Incidents of poor behaviour are rare and dealt with swiftly, fairly and effectively. Rewards, including merits and the opportunity to take part in prize draws, are appreciated, particularly by the younger students. Incidents of exclusion are very rare.
- Students give willingly of their time. Many take part in student or eco councils. Individuals, groups and classes identify charitable projects to support. In the summer of 2012, 20 students from Years 10 and 12 spent a month in Kenya supporting community projects.
- Attendance figures are consistently above the national average and persistent absence figures are significantly below. Despite distances travelled, students arrive on time to school and to

class.

The leadership and management are outstanding

- The headteacher leads the school with a gentle manner and an air of unquestionable authority. He demonstrates complete commitment to deliver the school's mission statement: 'A Catholic community dedicated to achieving excellence for all.' He expects the best from everyone, including himself, at all times and exerts challenge whenever this is not the case.
- All school leaders are passionate about their roles and responsibilities and are unequivocally ambitious for each and every student. There is an uncompromising quest for excellence. Senior leaders correctly identify the strengths and relative weaknesses and priorities for improvement. Actions taken to remedy relative weaknesses, such as addressing a dip in students' performance in GCSE geography, have been conspicuously successful.
- The headteacher leads on teaching quality in the school because he sees himself as the 'head teacher'. Responsibility is devolved directly to heads of department, who closely monitor the quality of teaching and learning in their subjects and check students' progress through reliable tracking systems.
- Department self-evaluation is comprehensive and challenges all heads of department to consider 'what can we do better?' Leaders at all levels are adept at carrying out evaluations and are responsible and held accountable for improvements. 'Students are our number one priority', explained one head of department.
- The management of teachers' own targets is robust, closely linked to school priorities and the achievement of their students. Teachers' pay awards are linked directly to a close assessment of their performance.
- Subject choices are broad and predominantly academic, although a number of vocational courses are also offered. Students are prepared well for future education and careers. Guidance to students about their study choices is highly individualised.
- The school has used additional pupil funding to increase student access to school trips and extra-curricular activities. A mentor has been appointed to provide emotional support and to improve the organisational skills of targeted individuals. A consequence of this has been that the progress of these students in English and mathematics has risen to well above the national figure.
- Parents views' are actively sought and regularly responded to. For example, the Editorial Board provides constructive advice as well as direct feedback on proposed initiatives. Parents are viewed as partners with the school and many decisions for individual pupils are made jointly between home and school. Parents are kept very well informed about their child's progress.
- The local authority provides light touch support to the school. On behalf of the local authority, St Mary's Catholic School has provided support to another school in need of improvement, seconding leaders to improve teaching and develop leadership.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - The governing body is highly effective in holding school leaders to account for all aspects of the school's performance. Governors contribute fully to evaluations and in planning the future direction of the school. Astute support and challenge ensure the school always has the

capacity to make further improvements. Governors maintain a high profile in school including at events and activities. Statutory duties, including those relating to safeguarding are fully met.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	117594
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	403332

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	942
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	144
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	John Cunningham
Headteacher	Anthony Sharpe
Date of previous school inspection	17 October 2007
Telephone number	01279 654901
Fax number	01279 653889
Email address	info@stmarys.net

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