

St Thomas Aquinas Catholic School

Wychall Lane, Kings Norton, Birmingham, West Midlands B38 8AP

Inspection dates

7–8 November 2018

Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Good
16 to 19 study programmes	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- Following a period of decline, strong and thoughtful leadership from the principal and other leaders have seen the school improve considerably over the past 18 months. It now provides pupils with a good quality of education.
- Leaders and governors have high expectations. They have put in place a demanding, knowledge-based curriculum. Pupils are rising to these high expectations. They enjoy their studies and are keen to do well.
- Those responsible for governance are very committed to the school and its ethos. However, they are not clear about the different roles of directors and local governors. The local governing body does not currently have sufficient expertise to carry out some of its delegated functions.
- Behaviour has improved significantly over the past 18 months. Pupils are well behaved and have excellent attitudes to learning. The school is calm and orderly throughout the day.
- Most pupils attend school very regularly. However, a minority do not. Consequently, overall attendance is below the national average for secondary schools.
- Teaching is good in almost all subjects. Teachers use their strong subject knowledge to provide high-quality explanations. Pupils appreciate their teachers' expertise.
- Relationships are strong across the school. Pupils like and trust their teachers and other adults. Consequently, pupils are happy to ask questions, offer answers in class and attempt challenging work.
- Some teaching remains less effective. Occasionally, activities are too easy or too hard for pupils. Some teachers do not check pupils' understanding in lessons as well as they should.
- Pupils make good progress in almost all subjects. Where achievement has been weaker in recent years, for example in mathematics, considerable improvement is now evident. However, pupils' progress remains weaker in history and in vocational subjects.
- Students enjoy and value the sixth form. They take part in a wide range of activities which supplement their studies effectively. Most students take academic subjects and they achieve well. However, the small number of students who take vocational subjects do not make as good progress.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve teaching so that pupils and students make at least good progress in all subjects, including history and vocational subjects, by ensuring that teachers consistently:
 - plan activities that are well matched to pupils' abilities
 - check on pupils' understanding in lessons and provide extra support or challenge when appropriate.
- Improve attendance towards the national average for secondary schools by ensuring that:
 - new procedures are fully embedded and therefore effective in their impact
 - governors provide greater scrutiny of attendance.
- Strengthen the impact of governance by ensuring that:
 - all those involved in governance are clear about their roles and responsibilities
 - the local governing body has sufficient expertise to carry out all of its delegated functions effectively.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- After its predecessor school was judged to be outstanding in 2011, the school's effectiveness declined. The decline continued following conversion to an academy in 2015 to a low point in 2016 when published outcomes at the end of key stage 4 were weak. The current principal became head of school in September 2017 and, from that time, his decisive and considered leadership has resulted in considerable improvement in all areas of the school, including behaviour, teaching and pupils' outcomes.
- Strong senior leaders, effective middle leaders and highly committed members of staff support the principal very well. Many members of staff and pupils told inspectors about the improvements the principal has brought about, especially in pupils' behaviour. All are proud to belong to the school.
- Senior and middle leaders are committed to improving the school. Their approach to school improvement, modelled by the principal, has been to seek out good practice in high-achieving schools that share characteristics with St Thomas Aquinas. They then use those ideas they believe would benefit the school. All changes are thoroughly thought through and then carefully implemented. Leaders always seek to evaluate the effectiveness of changes, checking that they have had the desired impact, then amending actions when necessary. This approach is proving successful in improving many aspects of the school's work.
- One major change leaders have put in place in the past two years has been a complete review of the school's curriculum. It continues to provide an appropriate range of subjects in all years. A personalised pathway approach in key stage 4 ensures that pupils take subjects that interest and engage them. The major change has been to move to a 'knowledge-based curriculum'. Explicit emphasis is placed on the key subject-specific knowledge pupils must learn and remember in order to be well placed for their next steps in learning. For example, in languages, great emphasis is placed on learning vocabulary and grammar. Regular checks are made to ensure that the knowledge is embedded in pupils' long-term memory. Similarly, in mathematics, pupils regularly revisit topics and are expected to recall the key knowledge specific to that area. Pupils are well aware they need to 'learn', 'remember' and 'recall' in all of their subjects.
- Leaders have implemented curriculum changes thoughtfully, initially rewriting learning schemes in key stage 3 and now moving into key stage 4. Middle leaders have led the development of learning schemes in their subjects and they have been well supported by link members of the senior leadership team. The positive impact of the curriculum changes is evident in the strong progress that pupils in Years 7 and 8 are now making in almost all subjects.
- The formal, taught curriculum is well supplemented by a wide range of extra-curricular clubs and activities. Pupils benefit from many opportunities to go on school trips, both locally and abroad. The school's ethos of high expectations, its curriculum and the wide range of extra-curricular opportunities contribute well to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Pupils are well prepared for life after school, whether they leave at the end of Year 11 or Year 13.

- Leaders know the school well. Their evaluation of strengths and weaknesses is clear, detailed and honest. They do not shy away from identifying and addressing those areas that are weak and need to improve. For example, leaders have an accurate view of the quality of teaching in the school. They ensure that training is well focused on subjects, themes or individuals where improvement is needed. They check that training has had the desired effect.
- Vulnerable pupils are well cared for in school. The leadership of provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) is highly effective. A strong team ensures that pupils with SEND are well supported by teachers and with extra help at other times when they need it. Leaders ensure that the pupil premium is used well to support disadvantaged pupils. Consequently, both groups of pupils are making good progress in school.
- In common with other leadership across the school, pastoral leaders have provided good leadership, which has had a considerable impact on improving behaviour in recent years. All changes have been carefully thought through, methodically implemented and then thoroughly evaluated. However, their actions to improve attendance have yet to yield the success that has been seen in improving behaviour.
- Membership of the Lumen Christi Catholic Multi-Academy Company (MAC) has brought several benefits to the school. It provides additional scrutiny of the school's safeguarding arrangements, including professional supervision for the school's designated safeguarding lead. The six schools within the MAC work closely together in many areas, most notably in spiritual life. Pupils from the schools have undertaken joint retreats and a joint choir performed an Easter-themed production last year. Pupils from St Thomas Aquinas train to be 'liturgical leaders' who then assist with worship in primary schools.

Governance of the school

- The MAC board of directors and a local governing body provide the school's governance. Governance arrangements have been developing and changing since the school became an academy as directors have reflected on the relationships between the six schools in the MAC, their principals and the local governing bodies.
- The roles and responsibilities of directors and local governors, as set out in the scheme of delegation, are currently not well understood by all. For example, the scheme of delegation states that it is the MAC board's responsibility to provide support and challenge to the principal. However, directors expect the local governing body to fulfil this function. The local governing body lacks the expertise in some areas, such as published achievement data, to perform this task effectively. Consequently, governance currently provides less scrutiny to some aspects of the school's performance, including outcomes and attendance, than it ought.
- The recent appointment of a Catholic senior executive leader (CSEL) to the MAC has begun to strengthen governance arrangements. The appointee provides considerable additional expertise and capacity, which is intended to increase the level of scrutiny on aspects of school performance. However, it is too soon to judge the impact that this appointment has had.

- Governance has several strengths. Directors and local governors are very committed to the school and its ethos. Members of the local governing body visit the school regularly. They provide considerable support to leaders. They provide some effective challenge in areas where they are confident, for example in improving pupils' behaviour.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- The leadership of safeguarding is meticulous. Procedures are clear and well understood. Staff have been well trained and are regularly updated on aspects of safeguarding. They are confident to pass on to leaders any concerns they have about pupils. Leaders deal with any concerns they receive swiftly and appropriately. They involve outside agencies when needed to ensure that pupils get the support they need. Safeguarding records are detailed, well organised and stored securely.
- All staff understand the importance of keeping pupils safe because leaders make safeguarding a top priority. A highly effective safeguarding team coordinates support for all vulnerable pupils, including: those who are subject to child protection, child in need or early help plans; those attending alternative provision; those who are looked after; and others who need extra help. Pupils told inspectors that they feel safe and well cared for in school. The great majority of parents and carers who responded to Parent View agreed.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Teaching has improved over the last two years and is now effective across all years and most subjects. There is some excellent practice in most subjects, including English, religious education and art. Teaching is strong in languages where very high expectations and precise teaching are consistently evident. Consequently, most pupils enjoy French and German and many choose to study a language in key stage 4.
- Teachers have high expectations of pupils across the school. Leaders have established clear routines that teachers implement with great consistency. For example, pupils are well prepared for lessons with appropriate equipment at the ready. Consequently, lessons start promptly and no time is wasted. During the inspection, inspectors did not see any pupils without the correct equipment. Similarly, all pupils carry with them a 'knowledge organiser' in which they file important sources of information they know they must learn.
- Teachers have secure subject knowledge. Most use this well to explain concepts to pupils and to model how to solve problems. The curriculum contains a strong focus on acquiring and remembering key knowledge. Teachers ensure that this focus is central in lessons and pupils understand the importance of retaining important subject-specific knowledge.
- Relationships between pupils and staff are warm and friendly. Pupils like and trust their teachers and other adults in school. Consequently, the atmosphere in classrooms contributes well to pupils' learning. Pupils are happy to attempt challenging tasks and have no hesitation in asking for support when they need it. They are willing to offer

answers to questions, knowing they have the support of their teachers and other pupils.

- High expectations, expert explanations, clear routines and strong relationships promote all pupils' learning well, and vulnerable pupils' learning especially well. Disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND benefit particularly from the improved teaching in the school. Staff also provide these groups with extra support at other times when they need it, for example if they are falling behind with their work. Consequently, these pupils are making good progress.
- Some less effective teaching remains in several subjects, including in history in key stages 3 and 4 and in vocational subjects in key stage 4 and the sixth form. At times, teachers do not plan activities that are well matched to pupils' abilities. Consequently, pupils find tasks too easy and learn little, or too hard and are unable to attempt them with any success. Where teaching is weaker, teachers do not check on pupils' understanding as well as they should. Consequently, they are unaware that pupils are finding the work too easy or too hard.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils are typically articulate, courteous and polite. In their time at school, they develop into confident and mature young people. They were keen to tell inspectors they feel well cared for and appreciate the wide range of opportunities the school provides for them in addition to their academic studies.
- Pupils feel safe in school. Inspectors talked to many pupils over the inspection's two days and all pupils confirmed this fact. They said that bullying is rare in school and that any that does happen is generally dealt with well. Although almost a quarter of the 65 parents who responded to Parent View did not believe that the school deals well with bullying, inspectors found no evidence to support this view.
- Pupils have a good understanding of how to keep themselves safe from possible dangers. They understand the potential risks of using the internet and social media and know how to protect themselves. Regular tutor sessions provide pupils with a well-planned and comprehensive personal, social, health and economic education programme. This contributes well to pupils' personal development.
- The school's careers education, information, advice and guidance programme is effective. It operates in all year groups and helps pupils to choose appropriate courses in key stage 4. It ensures that they are well informed about their options when they leave Year 11 and, for those who remain into the sixth form, when they leave Year 13. Leaders regularly evaluate its effectiveness against good practice benchmarks. For example, they are currently seeking to improve the school's links with businesses, having identified this as a weaker area. Almost all pupils who leave Year 11 and students who leave Year 13 move on to education, employment or training.
- Pupils who attend alternative provision placements are very well cared for. Staff visit them every fortnight to check on their progress. The school receives weekly reports on

their attendance and behaviour, or more frequently if there are any concerns. The school's safeguarding team discusses each pupil every week, reviewing the effectiveness of their alternative provision placement. Consequently, these pupils make good progress from their different starting points.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Behaviour has improved considerably over the past 18 months. Many pupils and members of staff were keen to tell inspectors this fact and all were highly appreciative of what leaders have done to secure good behaviour.
- In lessons, pupils almost always behave well. They demonstrate excellent attitudes to learning. They are attentive, they work hard and they are keen to do well. Pupils are, without exception, smartly dressed in correct uniform and in possession of all the equipment they need for each lesson.
- At breaktimes, lunchtimes and between lessons, the school is calm and orderly. Inspectors observed two wet breaktimes when the school's halls were very crowded. Pupils behaved sensibly and there was no inappropriate behaviour. Each morning and afternoon session, other than in wet weather, begins with a 'line up' where the entire school lines up in tutor groups, in silence, on the school playground. Tutors then lead their forms into school in silence. This regular routine contributes very well to a calm and productive start to each morning and afternoon.
- Leaders use exclusion appropriately, as a sanction of last resort. The number of fixed-term exclusions, which had been below average, rose last year as a result of much higher expectations of pupils' conduct. Now that much improved behaviour has been secured, the use of exclusion is falling. Instances of serious disruptive behaviour are now very rare. Inspectors observed none during the inspection.
- The great majority of pupils attend school very regularly. A minority do not and, consequently, attendance is a little below the national average for secondary schools and has remained so for the past two years. Leaders have evaluated their actions to improve attendance and have put into place additional measures this year. These include dedicating additional staff to following up absent pupils and providing extra support for parents of poor attenders. These additional strategies have been in place for just half a term and so it is too soon to judge their success.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Outcomes at the end of key stage 4 have improved considerably over the past two years. Provisional results for 2018 show pupils making similar progress, from their starting points, as other pupils make nationally in almost all subjects. They make very good progress in languages and good progress in many subjects, including English. Their progress in mathematics is a little less strong, although still broadly average. It has improved markedly when compared with the previous year.
- Inspection evidence confirmed that current pupils are making good progress in all years and in almost all subjects. Progress is particularly strong in Years 7 and 8 where pupils are benefiting most from the school's revised, knowledge-based curriculum. The

impact of this change is also evident in key stage 4, although here it is at an earlier stage of development.

- Disadvantaged pupils make similar good progress as other pupils make. In recent years, disadvantaged pupils have made weak progress, but this picture has now improved considerably. Older disadvantaged pupils in Years 10 and 11 are still a little behind other pupils, but the gap is closing. Disadvantaged pupils in key stage 3 have similar attainment to that of other pupils, and in some cases, it is better.
- Pupils with SEND now make strong progress in all year groups. They have benefited considerably from improved teaching over the past two years. Additionally, staff provide effective support, outside of lessons, when these pupils need extra help.
- Outcomes remain weaker in a small number of subjects in key stage 4, notably history and vocational subjects, including business, health and social care, and sport studies. This is the case in provisional results for 2018 and for current pupils. Leaders have put strategies in place to raise standards in these subjects, but it is too soon to be confident of improvement.

16 to 19 study programmes

Good

- Leaders have a good understanding of the sixth form's strengths and weaknesses. They take appropriate action to address weaknesses. For example, they have put into place several strategies to improve achievement on vocational courses and these are beginning to have a positive impact. They carefully check on students' progress and provide them with extra support when it is needed.
- The great majority of students take academic courses. Attainment and progress in these subjects are in line with those seen nationally from students with similar starting points. Students achieve well in English, art, and information and communication technology. A small number of students take vocational subjects and their outcomes are below those seen nationally. However, some improvement is evident in provisional results for 2018 and this improvement was confirmed by other inspection evidence.
- The teaching of academic subjects is effective in the sixth form and shares the strengths evident in key stages 3 and 4. Teachers use their strong subject knowledge to ensure that students are well taught. The teaching of vocational subjects is less effective, but even here some improvement is evident.
- Students' behaviour is exemplary. They attend regularly, are punctual and provide good role models for younger pupils.
- Students benefit from a wide range of non-qualification activity, which most embrace with enthusiasm. For example, students help younger pupils with their reading. They raise considerable sums of money for charities. They take part in the school's successful Duke of Edinburgh programme. Students value and enjoy being part of the sixth form. Consequently, almost all who start in Year 12 complete their courses. The small number who leave during Year 12 do so because opportunities such as apprenticeships have become available.
- Careers advice is good in the sixth form. Students are provided with appropriate information about higher education and other options, including apprenticeships. They visit several local universities and staff provide good support for students as they make

higher education and apprenticeship applications. All students complete appropriate work experience placements. Approximately 70% of students move to universities when they leave the school, with the remainder taking up employment or apprenticeships.

- Students who join the sixth form without having secured GCSEs in English and/or mathematics at grade 4 or above continue studying these subjects. They are taught well. The proportion who are successful in improving their grade in mathematics is similar to that seen nationally and better than that seen nationally in English.

School details

Unique reference number	141835
Local authority	Birmingham
Inspection number	10048341

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	11 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,149
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	152
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair	Peter Vince
Principal	Chris Martin
Telephone number	0121 464 4643
Website	www.stacs.org
Email address	enquiry@stacs.bham.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- This is larger than the average-sized secondary school.
- It converted to become an academy in April 2015. It is part of the Lumen Christi Catholic Multi-Academy Company (MAC), along with five local Catholic primary schools.
- According to its scheme of delegation, Lumen Christi Catholic MAC's board of directors has responsibility for the school's ethos, values and strategic direction and providing support and challenge to the principal. The school's local governing body has responsibility for day-to-day matters, including standards, teaching and the curriculum.

- The current principal took up his post in September 2018, having been head of school for the previous 12 months.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils is well above average.
- An average proportion of pupils speak English as an additional language.
- The proportion of pupils with SEND is broadly average.
- A small number of pupils attend alternative provision at the James Brindley Academy, the City of Birmingham School, the Aston Villa Foundation and Bournville College.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed learning in lessons, and some of these observations were conducted jointly with senior leaders.
- Inspectors talked to many pupils and students about their learning and their attitudes to, and opinions about, school. They observed them at breaktimes, lunchtimes and as they moved around the school.
- Inspectors visited an assembly, several morning registration periods and observed a morning 'line up'.
- A wide range of documents was scrutinised, including information relating to governance, attendance, behaviour, safeguarding, pupils' and students' progress and the checks made on the quality of teaching.
- Meetings were held with the principal, senior leaders, middle leaders and teachers. A meeting was held with three members of the board of directors, including its chair, vice chair and the CSEL. A separate meeting was held with three members of the local governing body, including its chair and vice chair. The lead inspector met with a representative of the diocese.
- Inspectors took account of parents' views by considering the 65 responses to Parent View.

Inspection team

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Thomas Walton	Ofsted Inspector
Andrea Quigley	Ofsted Inspector
Gwendoline Onyon	Ofsted Inspector

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In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route. www.gov.uk/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings.

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