

Ripley St Thomas Church of England High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	119796
Local Authority	Lancashire
Inspection number	313426
Inspection dates	22–23 January 2008
Reporting inspector	David Moore 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 students	11–19
Gender of students	Mixed
Number on roll	1,528
School	1,261
6 th form	267
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Professor Crewdson
Headteacher	Mrs E Nicholls
Date of previous school inspection	March 2005
School address	Ashton Road Lancaster Lancashire LA1 4RS
Telephone number	01524 64496
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Age group	11–19
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an Additional Inspector. The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: achievement and standards; students' personal development and well-being; the curriculum; the school's use of evaluation; and the quality of sixth-form provision. Evidence was gathered from: the school's self-evaluation form; national published assessment data; the school's own assessment records; a range of school documentation; observation of the school at work; discussions with staff, students; and parental questionnaires.

Description of the school

Ripley St Thomas Church of England High School is a specialist language college and training school. Students are drawn from a wide area and 59 primary schools have children who apply for places at Ripley. Priority is given to those with church membership. The ability profile of students when they enter school is generally in line with the national average but with a higher than average percentage of more able students. Many of the most able students in the area attend two grammar schools in the City of Lancaster. The proportion of students with educational special needs or disabilities is below the national average, as is the proportion receiving free school meals. In general, students come from homes in wards of average levels of deprivation; few come from the most deprived areas of the city.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Ripley St Thomas is an outstanding school that provides a high quality of education and care for all students. Exemplary leadership at all levels and effective management have enhanced and moved the school forward so that standards achieved by students across the key stages and the sixth form are significantly above the national average. In 2007, 87% of Year 11 students achieved five GCSE passes at grades A* to C; 75% of these included both English and Mathematics. Ninety-eight percent of the Year 11 students achieved five passes at grades A* to G. Throughout Key Stage 3 students make good progress. Results in the national tests for Year 9 in English, mathematics and science are well above the national average and have continued to improve over the last three years, but with a slight dip in English in 2006.

Effective monitoring has been introduced so that senior managers can identify underperformance by individual students and curriculum areas. This information is in part used to inform training for staff, which has led to improvements in teaching and learning. As a result, the examination results have improved and the gap between boys' and girls' performances narrowed to less than 10%. All students, including those from minority ethnic backgrounds, make good progress as they move through the school. Students with special educational needs or disabilities achieve particularly well, either going into the sixth form or college placement. An ethos of striving for excellence within a Christian context is the hallmark of the school.

Students enjoy coming to school and demonstrate their commitment in very high levels of attendance; they are rightly proud of their school. A Year 7 boy's response to being asked what he thought of the school was, 'It's quite a good place to be!' When pressed he said, 'There's lots to do and it's interesting and you feel you belong.' Another student who joined late in his school career echoed these sentiments when describing his arrival at the school as 'being made welcome, as if I had always belonged'. He said he felt 'comfortable and wanted to work hard to prove he could make something of himself'.

Opportunities for students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are extensive. As a result, the students learn to work with and value others, develop tolerance and understand the needs of others. The curriculum ensures they are aware of social and religious diversity, not just within the United Kingdom but the world. Students are given many opportunities to accept leadership roles and contribute to the school community. Behaviour is excellent, both in lessons and around the school; students move through the very narrow corridors aware of others' needs.

Students' personal development is outstanding. The overall provision and extensive extra-curricular activities enable them to develop into mature and confident young adults who show a sense of responsibility and concern for others. Through charity fundraising, significant sums of money are obtained, and links with projects have enabled some sixth-formers to travel and work in areas to which the money was donated.

The quality of teaching and learning is good overall and includes outstanding practice. The introduction of rigorous monitoring of teaching and learning has positively influenced the professional development of staff. It has enabled heads of subjects and years to have a clearer understanding of areas for improvement - for example, dealing with some small areas of underperformance. Lessons are generally well planned and sharply focused, with clear learning objectives. Lessons, particularly for lower attaining students in Key Stage 3, are exciting, well targeted and fun to be in. As a result, students who do not find formal learning easy enjoy their lessons and participate fully. Teachers' subject knowledge is good and they set high expectations for students. In all lessons, teachers use a variety of learning activities that motivate and sustain the interest of students and develop their learning. The good relationships between students and teachers contribute to effective learning. Students are eager to learn, and their attitudes and generally good behaviour enable staff to set challenging and exciting work. Most lessons have a sense of urgency and purpose but in a few lessons, where teachers do not follow agreed procedures and ways of working accepted by the whole staff, outcomes for students were satisfactory rather than good or better.

The curriculum is broad and balanced, and meets statutory requirements. The school's modern languages specialism has resulted in students having greater opportunity to study a larger number of languages. The outreach work with local primary schools is also benefiting the school, as different ways of working learned from primary schools are influencing classroom practice at Ripley. The designation of training school status similarly is beginning to influence teaching strategies and how teachers view the curriculum. The school is able to meet the needs of all students and the retention of a school farm enables it to offer students courses in agriculture and horticulture. Provision for science has been improved in the last 18 months and has resulted in better performance by students in national assessments and public examinations. As a Christian school, the development of spirituality is given a high priority; worship is central to the school's life and is outstanding. Religious education is well organised and very effective in helping young people to understand the role of faith in a diverse world.

The care, guidance and support offered to students are excellent. The strong Christian ethos is put into practice, as manifest in the emphasis on treating students as individuals, with dignity and respect. Students are keenly aware of the school's values and most share them. Students feel safe, knowing a firm stance is taken in dealing with bullying and aggressive behaviour. Similarly, students know they can turn to pastoral and academic staff over any concerns. A significant strength of the care of students is the additional time given by staff to students after school. It is not the exception but the norm, and students were effusive when speaking to inspectors of their appreciation. The school is highly effective in supporting looked-after children, who, providing they remain on roll for sustained periods, do well socially and academically. The support offered to students identified as having special educational needs or disabilities is outstanding; these students make very good progress as they move through the school.

The leadership and management are outstanding. Working with the governors and teachers, the relatively new leadership team and headteacher have, in a short period of time, improved the work of the school and the outcomes it achieves. The senior

leadership team works effectively together and the headteacher's drive and energy and availability to staff, students and students were constantly commented upon. As one teacher said, 'I know I can get to the head and will be listened to and that action will be taken if necessary. I feel well supported.' The school's development plan gives a clear direction for the future with its strong emphasis of being a Christian school for the 21st century. Middle managers, through training, have strengthened their roles, and changes to the role of heads of pastoral care have drawn the academic and pastoral systems more closely together. The capacity of the school to improve has in the last two years been fully demonstrated and the school is in a very strong position to refine its monitoring systems to better meet the changing needs of its students and students.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

Standards in the sixth form are well above average and achievement is particularly good. The small proportion of students joining from other schools, are welcomed and settle quickly into the routines and expectations of Ripley. Examination results at AS and A level in 2007 were well above average. The proportion of the higher GCE grades, A-B, also rose. The school's focus on improving the quality of teaching has been effective in correcting the previous year's dip in standards. Over the last three years, standards have improved and the variation between subjects is narrowing. Results in the vocational subjects are well above average. Student progress is evaluated rigorously and where performance causes concern, effective action is taken.

Students' personal development and well-being are outstanding. Students say they especially appreciate the ready help and guidance they receive from teachers that help them do so well. Teaching and learning are good overall with a significant proportion outstanding. Teachers inspire confidence through their expert subject knowledge. As a result, learning is enthusiastic and sharply focused. It provides ample opportunity for the majority who wish to follow academic courses. The school's specialist college status in modern foreign languages provides rich and diverse opportunities for sixth form students to learn many languages. Students also have the opportunity of an international experience during which they can study or work abroad, or, for instance, study Greek or Russian in school.

The outstanding care, guidance and support enjoyed by students in the main school continue in the sixth form. The assessment and tracking of students' progress contribute to their good achievement and many students speak of determination to reach the challenging targets set by their teachers. The leadership and management of the sixth form are outstanding and have a very successful focus on raising achievement and improving what is provided for all students.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure staff consistently follow agreed procedures and ways of working that promote effective teaching and learning.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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 effectiveness of the Foundation Stage	NA	
The effectiveness of boarding provision	NA	
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	1

Achievement and standards

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

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 interests 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.

The grey boxes are used wherever the inspection team has sufficient evidence to come to a secure judgement.

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 tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	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



24 January 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Ripley St Thomas Church of England High School, Lancaster, LA1 4RS

Thank you for your cooperation and openness in answering the questions put to you by inspectors when we visited your school. I was particularly grateful to those of you who gave your time to meet formally with us. As promised, here are our views of your school.

Inspectors identified, as many of you told us, that Ripley St Thomas School is outstanding. The new headteacher and senior leadership team have a clear understanding of how to improve the school. They have introduced monitoring so that they can evaluate the quality of what you receive in the classrooms and around the school, and they use it to plan very good training for staff. As a result, standards continue to improve, and national test and examination results in your school are outstanding. We also felt the progress you made as you moved through the school was good and we recognised how hard you work.

It is also clear that the quality of care, guidance and support you receive is outstanding. We were delighted that what we found, and agreed with what many of you told us. We were impressed with how willing staff were to assist and support you, even giving you time after school and at lunchtimes. We were also impressed with your positive comments about how swiftly staff deal with issues of bullying and that, as a result, most of you feel the school is a safe place to be, where you can get on with learning and socialising with each other.

We were particularly impressed by the worship in the school and by your commitment to caring for others, for instance by raising money for charities. Similarly we were impressed with your attendance and behaviour - in particular the way you managed to move around the narrow corridors and small lunch area without getting irritated with each other.

During our visit we were privileged to sit in on some of your lessons, nearly all of which were either good or outstanding. We were pleased to see how positive your attitudes to learning were and the care with which teachers planned lessons, involved you and made lessons interesting. We were delighted to see how many of you clearly enjoyed your learning.

Inspectors felt that you have an extensive range of curricular opportunities and that the introduction of modern language specialist status has enabled you to study a much wider range of languages than in many other schools. We were also impressed

that the school has been able to maintain the farm and is able to offer agriculture and horticulture as part of the curriculum. There are very few schools that can offer this facility.

The level of advice and support you receive is outstanding and it is clear when speaking with you how the school develops, with your parents and carers, your self-confidence. We particularly noticed in Years 10 and 11 and in the sixth form how staff support and advise you in making choices for your futures.

The report will make clear that inspectors find the management and leadership of your school to be outstanding. In a very short space of time, the headteacher and senior staff have made changes that have led to improvement and that they, working with teachers and the governing body and yourselves, have improved what was already a very good school.

Inspectors found the leadership and management of the sixth form to be outstanding, as too, was the curricular provision. The quality of teaching clearly motivated and supported sixth-formers and we noted that both at AS and A level results were outstanding. We were pleased to find that our findings met so many of the views expressed by sixth-formers, whose enthusiasm and commitment to the school were so impressive.

We have identified an area where we feel the school could make improvements.

- Ensure staff consistently follow agreed procedures and ways of working that promote effective teaching and learning.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish all of you every success in the future and in particular those of you taking your SATs, GCSE and AS and A levels this year - steady nerves and lots of luck.

Yours sincerely

David Moore HMI