

La Retraite Roman Catholic Girls' School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	100637
Local Authority	Lambeth
Inspection number	285834
Inspection dates	6–7 June 2007
Reporting inspector	Anne Wellham HMI

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	11–19
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number on roll	
School	842
6th form	133
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs T Blythin
Headteacher	Mrs M Howie
Date of previous school inspection	19 November 2002
School address	Atkins Road London SW12 0AB
Telephone number	020 8673 5644
Fax number	020 8675 8577

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

La Retraite is a popular, over-subscribed Roman Catholic comprehensive school. Nine-tenths of students are from minority ethnic groups with nearly half being of Black British African heritage. Sixty-four percent of students have a first language other than English. The number of students with identified learning difficulties is slightly below average. The proportion of students entitled to free school meals is above the national average and a proportion come from deprived backgrounds. The school gained specialist status for science and mathematics in 2004.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

'Choosing La Retraite is one of the best decisions we have made as parents. We have never regretted it for a moment'. This comment reflects the high level of parental support that exists for this popular and oversubscribed school. Harmonious relationships, excellent behaviour and a strong desire to learn are features that make this an outstanding school where girls feel very happy and safe. They enjoy school because they know they are taught well and are supported to do their best. Standards are above average, teaching and learning are good and students achieve very well. The school's strong ethos and Christian values underpin a high level of care. The very dedicated staff provide excellent, guidance and support for all. The personal development of the girls, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, is outstanding and all students are encouraged to understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens and play an active role in the community. A high value is placed on the contribution the sixth form makes to the school by staff and students.

The school's specialist status for science and mathematics has brought many benefits to both subjects and is having a positive impact in many areas of school life, particularly by sharing good practice in teaching and learning. Extensive opportunities for staff training and development, matched carefully to the school's priorities, contribute strongly to the progress, personal development and well being of learners and the quality of teaching, curriculum and care. Rigorous monitoring and evaluation linked to a coherent cycle of improvement planning has contributed to improved standards and progress, particularly at Key Stage 4.

The experienced and committed headteacher and members of the leadership team, some of whom have new responsibilities, have a very clear view of the school's strengths and know which areas require further development. The leadership and management skills of middle leaders are being successfully developed and considerable progress has been made in developing the students' contribution to decision making particularly through the school council. Despite efforts to improve attendance, authorised absence remains higher than average as a small number of parents of African and South American heritage take their daughters out of school during term time to fulfil family commitments abroad.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The school has a good sixth form and in collaboration with two other schools, provides students with a wide range of academic courses with some vocational options. Students are very appreciative of both the subject choices and the excellent enrichment opportunities that are offered. Sixth formers are keen to accept responsibility, see themselves as role models and make an important contribution to the life of the school and the local community. They receive excellent support and guidance in their studies and in their higher education and career choices. A rigorous tracking system, combined with personal support from subject teachers and form tutors, ensures that many students achieve well. In many subjects, the standards achieved by students are above average and they make good progress. However, there are some inconsistencies in the results, with weaker performance in a few subject areas. Detailed self-evaluation and improvement planning by departments shows an awareness of the strengths and weaknesses although this has yet to be brought together into a coherent sixth form development plan.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve attendance by reducing the rate of authorised absence
- Raise the performance of the sixth form in line with achievement in the rest of the school.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 2

Standards are high and examination results at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 have improved over the past three years for all students. In 2006 the GCSE results for students achieving grades A*-C increased significantly to 16% above the national average. Attainment is consistently above average for all groups of students including those from minority ethnic groups, learning difficulties, free school meals and those students with English as an additional language (EAL). Close monitoring and intervention throughout Key Stage 4 ensures all students receive the support that they need to provide the best opportunity for them to attain the best results they can. For example, the EAL coordinator helps with English coursework moderation and has been instrumental in developing a strategy specific to supporting EAL students in achieving higher standards. Similarly at Key Stage 3, attainment is above the national average in all three core subjects.

All students have made very good progress between Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 and from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4. The school mid-term monitoring system plays an important role in securing positive value added for each student as there is targeted intervention for students requiring specific support.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Students' spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development is excellent. Their response, for example, in assemblies is calm and reflective. They have a clear understanding of right and wrong shown by their contribution to creating the school's 'Six Golden Rules to Promote Success'. Adherence to these rules is seen through their excellent behaviour in lessons and at breaks, and from favourable comments received when they make visits outside school. Students from a wide range of cultural backgrounds mix and develop social skills very harmoniously. Bullying is very rare, and students have great confidence that this will be dealt with rapidly and effectively by teachers. They respond very positively to opportunities for cultural development, for example through music, art and drama. Through their school council representatives, students voice their views on items for improvement, and this is advancing their social development very well. Beyond the school they use their compassion for less fortunate communities in the world, to raise money for charities.

Students show a very good awareness of health and fitness. In a Year 9 lesson in health and social care, students were very knowledgeable about how germs enter the body, and the measures that can be taken to prevent this. They gain an increasing understanding of the opportunities available for future employment through mini-enterprise projects, and vocational subjects.

Attendance is satisfactory, and broadly in line with the national average. Authorised absence is higher than average, however the school is aware that this originates from a very small number of long-term absences.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching and learning is good with outstanding features. Teachers have good subject knowledge and use a variety of teaching styles to ensure that the engagement of the students continues throughout lessons. Very good working relationships between teacher and students characterise the learning. One student described her teachers as always 'happy and lively' and was proud of the dialogue that took place about identifying the best ways for her to learn. The use of assessment for learning enables students to reflect on their learning and to make very good progress. For example, in a maths lesson they were confident about their learning as mistakes and misconceptions were used as positive ways in which to further understanding. In a chemistry lesson, marked work from a previous lesson was used to plan an activity involving peer assessment of student responses to develop criteria to produce an excellent answer. Classroom management focuses on providing challenging and stimulating tasks and finding the best possible ways for students to learn. Paired work, small group discussions, quizzes, games, rhymes, the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and mini whiteboards are examples of the ways in which the pace of learning is sustained. Marking is regular in all subjects but in a few, the written feedback does not always clearly indicate what students need to do to improve.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The curriculum is outstanding. The school's rationale is that it provides for the needs of all students: it achieves this exceptionally well. The curriculum responds effectively to the context from which students come - widely dispersed inner city areas of mixed heritage backgrounds, and many with English as an additional language. The curriculum is designed to enable girls to enter non-traditional occupations with confidence. Health and social education features strongly because these are major occupations in the locality. This provision shows continuity from Year 7 through to a GCSE course, and in the sixth form. Excellent provision is made for students for whom a wholly academic programme would be inappropriate, through a number of vocational courses. Students with learning difficulties and disabilities are provided for well through individual and small group lessons that improve standards in basic skills. The programme of Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education (PSHCE) and discrete lessons in health and citizenship in Years 7 and 9, and work-related Learning in Year 8, make a substantial contribution to preparing students to thrive successfully in often challenging environments beyond school. A broad extra-curricular programme including a popular range of clubs, visits, and residential trips and visiting speakers enriches students' learning very well and adds considerably to their enjoyment of school.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Care for the individual student is central to the school's ethos and is an outstanding feature. All teachers and support staff demonstrate dedication to ensuring each student gains enjoyment and fulfilment at La Retraite. Care is evident in each lesson and activity, and is supported by form tutors and Key Stage Directors. Students know their progress and how to improve through regular assessment. Adults receive regular training in the procedures for protecting students from harm, and all adults have a CRB disclosure. Students have a very good understanding of how to stay safe from risks. Weekly lessons in PSHCE successfully promote self esteem by developing an awareness of the importance of health and well being and encouraging students to make a positive contribution to their communities. Additional discrete lessons in health, citizenship and work-related learning show the school's commitment to guiding and supporting students' development in these important areas. The school's care, guidance and support of its most vulnerable students are excellent.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 2

The outstanding leadership and management provides a common sense of purpose. This focuses on enabling students to achieve the highest possible academic standards and to become confident articulate young women well equipped to contribute to society. The school is very successful in identifying and tackling barriers to learning for students from different cultural backgrounds and providing well targeted guidance and support. The Headteacher provides very strong leadership and is supported by a dedicated team whose roles are well matched to the school's priorities. The high quality of the school's self evaluation and review results from rigorous monitoring and analysis of performance at all levels. This helps the school to identify and prioritise areas for improvement such as developing the skills and roles of middle leaders and improving assessment for learning. Self evaluation links effectively to a coherent cycle of whole school and departmental improvement planning, performance management and a very well designed and cost effective programme of training and professional development. This underpins the school's excellent capacity to continue to improve and to sustain performance during the period leading up to the retirement of the current headteacher. Governance is very good combining encouragement and support with a sufficient level of challenge. This has been evident in their determination to appoint a person with exactly the right qualities and attributes to take over from the current headteacher.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

<i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate</i>	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	2
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1	2
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 behaviour of learners	1	
The attendance of learners	3	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	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 the 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.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1	2
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 performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	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	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

18 June 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of La Retraite Roman Catholic Girls' School, London, SW12 0AB

I am writing to thank you for making us so welcome when we came to inspect your school recently. We really enjoyed meeting you and your teachers, visiting some of your lessons and assembly and looking at your work.

I am very pleased to let you know of our inspection findings. We think your school is outstanding. Everyone works together to make sure that you are able to do your very best. We were very impressed with how well you behave and the respect you show each other. The opportunities that you have to study many different subjects and to take part in school activities and the care and support you receive from your teachers help you to make very good progress during your time at the school. This is true for academic achievement and also for your development as responsible young women. You clearly enjoy school and the school council gave us a very strong message that you really care about your education.

The headteacher, senior staff and governors lead your school very well. They make sure that you are continually encouraged to have high expectations of yourselves and others. There are some things that are changing, including having a new headteacher but we believe that your school will continue to get even better.

The sixth form plays an important part in the school and sixth formers make really good progress except in a few subjects. We have asked the school to make sure that students who stay on achieve as well as they can in all their subjects. We were also concerned about some girls who are absent from school during term time. We would like you, your parents and teachers to help them understand that when they miss school they miss the chance to learn and we know that everyone at La Retraite cares about learning.

Our very best wishes for the future

Anne Wellham HMI