

**INSPECTION UNDER SECTION 10 OF THE
SCHOOL INSPECTIONS ACT 1996**

***St Alban's RC High School
The Park
Pontypool***

School Number: 678-4603

Date of Inspection: 30 September-4 October 2002

By:

***Miss Glynis Owen
Registered Inspector***

Date: 18 November 2002

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CURRICULUM NOMENCLATURE AND KEY STAGES

A new nomenclature to describe pupils' progress through school was introduced in 1989. This system of numbering year groups from the start of compulsory schooling to age 18 is intended to ease communication among schools, governing bodies, parents and UAs and emphasise the importance of continuity.

The term "Reception" (R) is applied to the year group of pupils in a primary school (not a nursery class) who attain the age of 5 during the academic year. "Year 1" (Y1) is applied to the year group of pupils who attain the age of 6 during the academic year and so on to Y13, the year group who attain the age of 18 during the academic year:

	R	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6	Y7	Y8	Y9	Y10	Y11	Y12	Y13
Years	4-5	5-6	6-7	7-8	8-9	9-10	10-11	11-12	12-13	13-14	14-15	15-16	16-17	17-18

Key Stage (KS) 1 of the national curriculum consists of Y1 and Y2; KS2 of Y3 to Y6; KS3 of Y7 to Y9; KS4 of Y10 and Y11 (which is the final year of compulsory education).

GRADE DESCRIPTIONS

The five-point grading scale used to represent the main judgements in this report is as follows:

1. Very good: many good features, some of them outstanding.
2. Good: good features and no major shortcomings.
3. Satisfactory: good features outweigh some shortcomings.
4. Unsatisfactory: some satisfactory work but shortcomings in important areas.
5. Poor: many shortcomings.

LIST OF ACRONYMS IN COMMON USE

A	Advanced
ACCAC	Qualifications Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales
AS	Advanced Subsidiary
CAD	Computer-aided Design
CAM	Computer-aided Manufacture
CoEA	Certificate of Educational Achievement
EWO	Educational Welfare Officer
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualification
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IEP	Individual Educational Plan
INSET	In-service Training
KS	Key Stage
NC	National Curriculum
NQT	Newly Qualified Teachers
OMR	Optical Mark Reader
PTA	Parent-Teachers Association
PS(H)E	Personal and Social (Health) Education
RoA	Record of Achievement
SA	School Action
SA+	School Action +
SATs	Standard Assessment Tasks
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCo	Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator
SMT	Senior Management Team
SDP	School Development Plan
UA	Unitary Authority
Y1-Y13	Year 1 - Year 13

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1. CONTEXT

The school and its priorities

St Alban's Roman Catholic High School is an 11-18 voluntary aided foundation comprehensive, having been grant maintained between 1994 and 1999. Numbers have increased considerably since the last inspection in February 1997. There are now 988 pupils on roll compared to 625 at that time. As well as an increase in Year (Y) 7, there has been substantial growth in sixth form numbers, from 117 to 270, during this period. More pupils have chosen to stay at St Albans for the sixth form and pupils from nearby 11-16 schools have opted to join. Overall, there are approximately equal numbers of girls and boys.

The school serves an area in and around Pontypool and Cwmbran, though pupils come from as far away as Blackwood in the west and Abergavenny in the north. About 75 per cent of pupils come from small town communities and 25 per cent from rural communities. The area ranges from economically disadvantaged to neither particularly prosperous nor disadvantaged, with some prosperous districts. Pupils come from the whole range of economic circumstances in the area. Twelve per cent are entitled to free school meals, a figure below the national average.

The intake covers the full range of ability and there are variations between different year groups in the school as to the proportion of able and less able pupils. Overall, the ability of year groups varies from below average to above average, with an upward trend in recent years. Sixteen pupils have statements of special educational needs (SEN) and a further hundred have been identified as needing some support. These proportions are below the proportion nationally. Very few pupils come from minority ethnic heritages and all pupils have English as their first language.

The majority of pupils come from Roman Catholic families, though a significant minority come from other denominations of the Christian church. The school aims to assist pupils in their faith journey as well as in their academic achievement and development as people. Everyone is urged to "Be the best they can be" in a culture of "High Ambition, High Challenge and High Achievement in a Caring Christian Community." The school development plan (SDP) sets out ways by which the school aims to translate these into practice.

The current headteacher took up his post in September 2001. The other members of the senior management team (SMT) are well established at the school.

2. MAIN FINDINGS

The main findings of the report

St Albans RC High School successfully promotes high achievement within a caring atmosphere. Its aims are widely fulfilled.

EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS ACHIEVED

Standards have improved substantially since the last inspection. There is now much good work, and some very good work. Examination results have also risen significantly and are now well above national averages.

Good features

- In the National Curriculum (NC) tests in 2001, at the end of KS3, 61 per cent of pupils reached at least level five in English, mathematics and science combined compared to 50 per cent nationally.
- In the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations, in each of the last three years, approximately 70 per cent of pupils have gained at least five grades A*-C compared to about 50 per cent nationally.
- All, or virtually all pupils achieved a qualification at GCSE during that period.
- Advanced (A) level results have been at least in line with national averages and in 2002 were well above.
- Results in vocational qualifications have also been good.
- Standards were at least satisfactory in 91 per cent of classes inspected. They were good in 53 per cent and very good in a further 14 per cent.
- Standards are particularly high in the sixth form overall, in information technology at Key Stage (KS)3 and English at KS4.
- Boys do particularly well at GCSE and in the sixth form, sometimes outperforming girls, contrary to the national trend.
- Pupils with SEN, taught in small groups, achieve well.
- Pupils' key skills of communication and numeracy across the curriculum are at least satisfactory. Their listening, speaking and reading are good.
- The "Raise a Grade" programme, by which individual pupils are targeted and receive extra teaching and support prior to examinations, has been very effective in raising standards.

Shortcomings

- Where standards are satisfactory as opposed to good, there are some shortcomings to be eliminated.
- Standards in Welsh at KS4 are unsatisfactory, as the time allocated to the subject is insufficient for course requirements to be covered.
- Although pupils have well-developed skills in using information and communications technology (ICT), they do not make regular use of these skills in all departments.
- Standards at KS3 are adversely affected by the limited time allocated in some subjects, by the uneven distribution of lessons during the fortnightly timetable and by the significant number of classes shared between two teachers.
- Standards in physical education are adversely affected by the limited facilities.

Standards in Subjects

Subject	KS3	KS4	Sixth form
English	Good	Very good	Very good
Mathematics	Good	Satisfactory	Very good
Science	Good	Good	Good
Design Technology	Satisfactory	Good	Very good
Information Technology	Very good	Good	Very good
Welsh	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	-
History	Satisfactory	Good	Very good
Geography	Good	Good	Good
Modern Foreign Languages	Good	Good	Good
Art	Satisfactory	Good	Good
Music	Good	Good	Very good
Physical Education	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Good
Drama	Good	Good	Very good
Home Economics	-	Satisfactory	-
Business Studies	-	Good	Good
Sociology	-	-	Good
Law	-	-	Good
Health and Social Care	-	Good	Good
Media Studies	-	-	Good
Leisure and Tourism	-	Good	Good
Electronics	-	-	Satisfactory

QUALITY OF EDUCATION PROVIDED

The commitment of teachers and the generous amount of time which they give to pupils outside the classroom are key factors in the high quality of education provided. The range of courses leading to qualifications, for pupils of different abilities, and the co-operation between home and school are also strong contributory factors in the school's success.

Strengths

- Teaching was at least satisfactory in 93 per cent of classes observed, good in 58 per cent and very good in a further 11 per cent.
- Relationships between teachers and pupils are very good.
- There are a number of curricular innovations which have a positive impact on standards. Among these is the whole-school planning for modules of work at KS3, by all departments, shared with pupils and parents and linked to a cycle of assessments.
- The range of vocational courses at KS4 and the sixth form extends the options available to pupils of all abilities and aptitudes.
- The provision made for pupils with SEN is good.
- Pupils' progress is closely monitored and support given to those who need it.
- Pupils take part in a range of extra-curricular opportunities. The musical/dramatic production is of a particularly high standard and involves large numbers of pupils. Sporting activities, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme and a range of clubs cater well for pupils' interests.
- The quality of education in the sixth form is particularly good. Students are encouraged to form good learning habits in an atmosphere of trust and support.

Shortcomings

- Teaching is unsatisfactory in seven per cent of classes. The proportion of unsatisfactory and satisfactory teaching is higher at KS3 than at the other key stages.
- In some subjects, at KS3 in particular, some classes are large.

THE SPIRITUAL, MORAL, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF PUPILS

The school has a strong sense of community and relationships are based on mutual respect. Individuals are valued and encouraged to develop to their full potential. Further details of the school's spiritual ethos and of religious education can be found in the report by the Diocesan Inspector.

Strengths

- The quality of pastoral care shown by teachers, tutors, heads of year and senior staff is very good.
- This is supplemented by good access to outside agencies when appropriate.
- Communication with parents is regular, through the effective use of well-produced diaries, which contain an array of useful information for pupils.
- All pupils have personal development plans, which trace their faith journey, their academic progress and their development as people.
- Pupils see their time in school as an opportunity to make friendships.
- The School Council, formed fairly recently, is giving pupils the chance to be involved in the decision-making process.
- Sixth formers are involved in helping younger pupils in a variety of ways.
- Sixth formers also gain experience of leadership, in a number of activities.
- The school is an orderly community, with high expectations of courtesy and co-operation. Pupils are friendly and helpful, sociable and outward-looking.
- The sums raised for charities are impressive, as is pupils' commitment to those less fortunate.

Shortcomings

- Statutory requirements are not met with regard to sixth form religious education and a daily act of collective worship for sixth formers.
- The Welsh dimension within the school is under-developed.

LEADERSHIP AND EFFICIENCY

Governors, the headteacher and senior management team have a clear vision of the future development of the school, with pupils' best interests at the heart of their commitment. That vision is shared with staff, pupils, parents and the wider community, resulting in a strong sense of collaboration and mutual support.

Strengths

- The headteacher, in post for one year, has taken a leading role in establishing a culture of self-evaluation for on-going improvement and developing the sense of team-work.

- The deputy headteachers, assistant headteacher and bursar also contribute substantially to the school's life and work. As a SMT, with the headteacher, they work effectively to drive the school forward.
- The chairman and vice-chairman of the governing body make invaluable contributions to the leadership of the school.
- There are clear plans in place for the long-term and short-term development of the school.
- The role of heads of department in planning, and evaluating performance is developing.
- The quality of management of the sixth form, and of the pastoral teams is very good.
- Financial planning is closely linked to development planning. Financial control procedures are regular and meticulous. The school gives good value for money.
- The school is generally well resourced in departments, and in central ICT facilities in particular.
- Good use is made of the accommodation available.
- Teachers are well qualified, committed to the school's ethos and deployed to teach their specialist subject.

Shortcomings

- Secondary funding in Torfaen is below the national average, and resources have been used in the last financial year to supplement the budget. Only a small surplus is projected in this financial year.
- The number of teachers, in relation to the number of pupils, is fewer than in schools nationally.
- There has not been sufficient in-service training (INSET) for teaching staff, middle managers and support staff to develop their skills to the full and broaden their knowledge of good practice. Not all heads of department monitor performance in their area.
- The book stock in the library is poor and as a resource centre the library is under-developed.
- A few health and safety issues were reported to the school.

Progress since the last inspection

Some action has been taken on each key issue, with effective improvements in school development planning, the monitoring role of form tutors, the visual environment of the school and the attendance rate. However, the time allocated to Welsh remains insufficient, and there are still anomalies in the time allocated to certain groups in art and music, as well as inconsistencies in the length of lessons. Boys' achievement has improved overall, though still not in English at KS3.

Nevertheless, the school has made significant progress overall since the last inspection and particularly in standards and examination results.

3. EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS ACHIEVED BY PUPILS

3.1 Standards Achieved in Subjects and Areas of Learning

Standards have improved substantially since the last inspection. There is now much good work and some very good work. Examination results have also risen significantly and are now well above national averages.

At KS3, standards are very good in information technology. They are good in English, mathematics, science, geography, modern foreign languages, music and drama. In all other subjects standards are satisfactory. There are several factors relating to the curriculum and timetable which impact adversely on standards at KS3, rendering them satisfactory as opposed to good. There is a shortage of time in Welsh, French, history, geography, art and music, either for all groups or some groups, a situation exacerbated by the varying length of lessons during the day. There is also a significant number of classes shared between two teachers where this is not a subject preference, and the lessons of some classes are unevenly distributed over the fortnightly timetable, adversely affecting continuity and progression in learning. Another contributory factor to standards achieved at KS3 is that there are more shortcomings in the quality of teaching in this phase. Also, standards in physical education are adversely affected by lack of facilities. A particular strength at this key stage, however, is that standards in all three core subjects are good and the time allocated to English, mathematics and science at least matches that in schools nationally, and verges on the generous side. Standards in information technology are also positively affected by the time allocation and the very good provision of computers in the school. Pupils also benefit from timetabled lessons in drama, in addition to NC requirements, and reach good standards. The unusually good feature which promotes achievement at KS3 across all subjects is, however, the division of the curriculum into six-week modules, with contents shared with pupils and parents, and assessed at the end of each module.

Results in the NC tests at the end of KS3 were higher in 2001 than in any previous year, and well above the national average. Sixty-one per cent of pupils gained at least level five in English, mathematics and science combined, compared to 50 per cent nationally. In each of the three subjects results were above the national figure; by ten per cent in mathematics and science and by six per cent in English. Girls did considerably better than boys overall, because of the large gap in performance in English, though boys still performed better than the level of performance of boys throughout Wales. In mathematics and science, boys did very slightly better than girls, contrary to the picture nationally. In 2002, the gender gap remained in English but not in the other two subjects, and the overall performance at level five and above was slightly lower than in 2001; 56 per cent of pupils reaching this level.

At KS4, pupils progress at a faster rate than at KS3, and the number of subjects in which standards are good increases. At KS4 standards are very good in English, and good in science, design and technology, information technology, history, geography, modern foreign languages, art, music, drama, business studies and vocational education. Standards are satisfactory in mathematics, physical education and home economics. In Welsh, standards are unsatisfactory and statutory requirements are not met because there is an insufficient amount of time to cover the course requirements. Standards in physical education are still affected by the lack of facilities. However, overall at this key stage, the quality of teaching is higher, pupils are highly motivated, time allocations are appropriate and any uneven distribution of lessons is less keenly felt. Two factors which have a very positive effect on standards achieved are the range of vocational courses which provide well for pupils' varying abilities and aptitudes and, secondly, the 'Raise a Grade' programme. Pupils identified as being on the borderline between gaining a grade D and a grade C at GCSE receive mentoring from senior staff and extra lessons from subject teachers. Of the 21 pupils targeted last year, 17 achieved at least five grades A*-C at GCSE.

Examination results at the end of KS4 have improved significantly since the last inspection and are now well above national averages. The percentage of pupils gaining at least five grades A*-C rose from 56 per cent in 1996, to 73 per cent in 2001. The comparable figure nationally, in 2001, was 50 per cent. In 2002, 69 per cent of pupils reached this level of performance. Across the full range of grades (A*-G), results have also been well above national figures and either 99 or 100 per cent of pupils have achieved at least one qualification at GCSE in these

years. Virtually all pupils are entered for GCSE in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science. Results have been highest in English, and higher in science than in mathematics, with the proportion of pupils gaining at least a grade C in all three combined, above the national figure. Particularly good results have also been achieved in art, French, German, geography, music, drama, information technology, design and technology and leisure and tourism.

Standards in the sixth form are the highest of the three key stages. The proportion of very good work is substantial, and rarely are standards less than good. The standards in English, mathematics, design and technology, information technology, history, music and performing arts are very good. Standards in electronics are satisfactory and in all other subjects are good. There is a wide range of courses accredited by different bodies, with students choosing from both traditional school subjects and new, vocationally based options. This flexibility in timetabling, and array of choices for differing abilities and aptitudes have a positive impact on standards achieved. The high quality of teaching, regular assessments, monitoring and support also contribute substantially to standards achieved.

Examination results at the end of the sixth form stage vary between year groups from in line with the national average to well above in 2002. In Advanced Subsidiary (AS)/A2 courses, VCE accreditation and BTEC National courses, results are comparable. In 2001, the average points score per student was 18, in line with the national average. However, in 2002, the proportion of top grades in all three course areas rose considerably. In A2 courses, 83 per cent of entries were awarded grades A-C, compared to the latest national comparator of 62, and all entries received a grade A-E pass.

In the 214 classes observed during the inspection, standards were at least satisfactory in 91 per cent. They were good in 53 per cent and very good in a further 14 per cent. This proportion of good and very good work has improved considerably on the figures of the previous inspection, though the proportion of unsatisfactory work has increased slightly. The percentage of good and very good work increases from 55 per cent at KS3 to 67 per cent at KS4 to 89 per cent in the sixth form.

The most able pupils achieve well in examinations and the percentage of grades A*/A combined at GCSE has been up to seven per cent above the national average in recent years. The proportion of top grades has been particularly good in the three core subjects, modern foreign languages and history over that period. Each year about ten pupils gain at least nine grades A*/A at GCSE and a similar number achieve two, three or four A grades at A level. There is also a tradition of Oxbridge entry every year for the last four years. The most able are placed in top sets or a band and are effectively challenged in the large majority of subjects. They cope well at KS3 even when the time allocated to the subject is lower than recommended. At KS4 and in the sixth form, they make faster progress. However, there is not always sufficient challenge in art, design and technology, history and physical education, particularly at KS3. Good examples of extension work were seen in English, modern foreign languages and information technology. However, younger pupils are not given enough opportunities, generally, to make individual investigations, solve problems and think independently. At KS4, and particularly in the sixth form, such opportunities increase and the most able respond well. In the sixth form, the easy access to the very good provision of ICT facilities affords students many opportunities for independent work with access to good research materials. The current book stock in the library restricts its potential as a resource centre for pupils of all key stages.

Pupils of average ability make steady progress, through their own motivation, the support of teachers and the clearly planned work, including regular homework. High expectations by teachers, seen particularly in English, science, modern foreign languages, information technology, geography, music, drama and vocational areas, receive enthusiastic response by

pupils. At KS3, however, the shortage of time in six subjects for some or all groups impacts adversely on the progress they make. Pupils have difficulty recalling previous work and a proportion of the limited time has to be spent on revising previous work, because of the gap between lessons.

The progress of pupils of lower ability is also adversely affected by the limited time factor in some subjects at KS3. Conversely, their performance is, equally, boosted by the co-operation between home and school, support of teachers and clearly set out curriculum. At KS4 they benefit from a range of vocationally based courses in which they are successful and about which they are enthusiastic. The size of groups is smaller, pupils receive more individual support from teachers and the 'Raise a Grade' programme is effective. At KS4 they achieve well. In 2001, 93 per cent of pupils gained at least five subjects at grades A*-G at GCSE, compared to 85 per cent nationally. In the sixth form, students also achieve well in a wide range of courses to which they are appropriately directed.

Pupils with SEN reach good standards. In small groups they make progress in key skills and in subjects across the curriculum. The ICT facility, 'Successmaker', enhances their development and the help which sixth formers give to individuals, to improve their reading, is effective in raising their level of performance in other subjects. At KS4 they are guided to make appropriate choices of examination courses and they achieve well. In 2000 and 2001, all pupils gained at least one GCSE, a commendable achievement.

Boys do particularly well at the school, and considerably better than nationally. Apart from results in KS3 tests in English, when girls do much better, boys achieve well in subjects across the board. As a consequence, their overall results at GCSE are in line with girls', and, by contrast, girls' results in mathematics at GCSE in 2001 were much lower than boys'. At A level in 2001, boys again did significantly better than girls, both at grades A-C and A-E. The school's carefully planned curriculum at KS3, in six week modules, across all subjects, with assessment at the end of each module, promotes consistent application. In classes observed, at all key stages, boys and girls worked equally conscientiously, though there are imbalances in numbers in top sets in English, with girls outnumbering boys. By contrast, boys performed better than girls in classes observed in physical education.

The school is committed to continuous improvement in standards and has the drive to build on the considerable improvement over recent years in standards generally and in examination results.

3.2 Standards Achieved in Key Skills across the Curriculum

Standards in listening, speaking and reading are good. Standards in writing and numeracy are satisfactory, and are unsatisfactory in ICT because a number of core and foundation subjects do not make satisfactory use of pupils' well-developed skills in ICT.

Planning for literacy across the curriculum is in its early stages, with support for departments from the literacy co-ordinator in the form of information on the potential impact of a policy, sample case studies of specific subjects and a questionnaire to raise awareness, allow departmental audits and provide an overview. Future analysis of the returned questionnaires is intended to identify good departmental practice. Some departments have successfully focused on practice in literacy (for example, mathematics, geography, science) to improve for example, presentation or extended writing.

Pupils listen well in whole-class activities, whether in lessons or in form time and assemblies, and they show respect for each other's views in collaborative work and discussion. Groups with special needs are given appropriate levels of challenge and support to extend their span of attention. Completion of tasks shows very good understanding of verbal instructions from teachers.

Opportunities to speak in pairs, groups and in whole-class question and answer sessions are frequent. Where standards are very good, pupils are given time to prepare contributions and teachers ensure that all pupils are involved by varying their methods of selecting contributors. Pupils are encouraged to use and extend technical vocabulary. There is good practice (for example in English) in varying group composition, to mix gender and individuals. Sixth form teaching in particular encourages a high level of oral presentation and group discussion but where groups are very small, this limits the breadth of collaborative talk. Through the newly formed School Council there are opportunities for pupils in all key stages to develop formal oral skills as they represent their form groups and feed back to peers, but, as in lessons, teacher intervention is sometimes over-supportive.

Many subjects offer opportunities for reading aloud, although practice varies between groups in any one subject, regardless of pupils' ability. Levels of reading fluency are high and there is a focus on reading skills, including key vocabulary and inference, in many subjects' assessments, resulting in improvement in reading for examination purposes. Individuals with low scores in their reading ability on entry to the school make very good progress by KS4. Sixth formers are confident in skimming, scanning and selecting evidence in a range of subjects and using the Internet. Although there are very good structures to support wider reading in English, and a focus on research skills through KS3 library lessons, the book stock in the library is poor and borrowing rates are low.

Standards of written accuracy are good but where there are errors other than of subject information, there are few subjects in which teachers make corrections or follow up. Written outcomes are highly focused on assessment objectives, linked with external examinations, and most subjects in KS3 and KS4 offer very limited opportunities for writing more than brief responses to questions. There is good practice in some subjects (for example, English) in using a range of note-making, including mind maps and bullet points, to record information and to prepare for extended pieces. In the sixth form, students' presentations in some subjects benefit from the sophisticated use of ICT and students' competence in literacy skills contributes to high levels of achievement across the curriculum.

Numeracy

There is no whole-school planning for numeracy or a numeracy co-ordinator across the curriculum, though these are both planned in the SDP. Thus whilst pupils acquire good number skills in mathematics, they do not always easily transfer these skills to other areas of the curriculum. Pupils use numbers well in information technology, science, geography and vocational education. However, in design and technology, pupils find that the use of numbers is often too challenging. In some other subjects, the promotion of numeracy is not planned in schemes of work.

ICT across the Curriculum

There are several good features: modules of work from a variety of subject areas are taught in discrete 'ICT across the curriculum' lessons by information technology specialist teachers to a good or very good standard using a set of sequential tasks to not only build information technology skills in the use of hardware and software applications but to apply the knowledge gained to a subject based context; vocational education is centred around good use of ICT, and the use of 'Successmaker' in the SEN department has had positive results in pupils' work in other subjects; the music department has a very good standard of facilities for musical composition and production using ICT and the standards of achievement within that department are good; design and technology has access to a very good standard of facilities for control applications and again standards of achievement are very good at KS3.

However, the teaching of ICT subject modules by information technology specialists results in the lack of integration of ICT into the subject areas for the majority of subjects and fails to

motivate subject specialists to improve their ICT skill base. Subject specialists have difficulty in booking available facilities which results in pupils having little or no opportunity to choose when to use ICT in their subject work or to see it as part of an integrated task; most ICT work completed within subject areas is produced using home facilities. ICT is seen as unsatisfactory or poor in English, Welsh, science, history, geography, modern foreign languages, art, physical education and in the design aspect of design and technology.

4. ETHOS OF THE SCHOOL

4.1 Pupils' Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development

The school's spiritual ethos, pupils' spiritual development, religious education and the daily act of collective worship will be reported separately in a report submitted by the Diocesan Inspector. The school does not meet the requirements of the law with regard to sixth form religious education and a daily act of collective worship for sixth formers.

The school is a happy, caring and supportive community, providing pupils with a secure environment in which to develop as individuals and as members of the community. The school has high expectations in terms of courtesy and co-operation. Pupils respond well and are friendly and helpful, sociable and outward-looking.

The quality of pupils' moral development is very good. In their discussions on moral issues in subject areas, they show that they have a strong sense of right and wrong. The respect they show their teachers and other adults is not confined to the classroom situation alone, but permeates all aspects of the life of the school. Visitors to the school are also treated with respectful friendliness. Pupils show a good degree of sensitivity in the way that they listen to each other, sharing their views and opinions. Their concern for people less fortunate than themselves is a significant strength of the school, with substantial amounts being donated to both local and national charities on a regular basis.

The pupils' social development is very good. Throughout the school, pupils co-operate and collaborate well as they work in pairs and in groups. The very positive relationships between pupils and with adults are a strong feature of the school and help to promote an integrated, supportive community. The School Council, formed fairly recently, gives pupils opportunities to undertake responsibilities and contribute to the life of the school. Sixth form students are involved in a wide range of activities where they can show their initiative and commitment. Many students are involved in fund-raising for different charities, the annual pilgrimage to Lourdes and preparing Christmas hampers for the local community. Some students in the sixth form take part in a 'buddies' system, where they volunteer to help younger pupils with numeracy and literacy skills. The school has a good range of extra-curricular activities which are well supported by the pupils. A policy on racial awareness has been developed, and is successful in ensuring that all pupils are socially included in the full life of the school.

Pupils' cultural development is satisfactory. In English, art, music, drama and modern foreign languages there are examples of good practice where pupils are encouraged to consider a wider diversity of cultures. Although some subjects have made attempts to incorporate aspects of the *Cwricwlwm Cymreig* into their schemes of work, and the school won a local Eisteddfod, the effect on pupils' cultural development is limited. The Welsh dimension within the school is under-developed.

4.2 Behaviour and Attitudes

The school has successfully maintained the good standards of behaviour identified in the last inspection. This is a happy, warm community where the potential of individuals is carefully

nurtured within the Christian ethos. It is a safe and stimulating environment and the school plays a positive role in developing the behavioural aspects of pupils' personal and social skills.

Throughout the school day pupils' behaviour is good. They are polite, courteous and respectful of others, and in school they create lifelong friendships. The large majority of pupils have positive attitudes to their work, they remain attentive and interested in their studies and demonstrate a keenness to make the most of their educational opportunities. These attitudes make a good impact on the standards of achievement, pupils' progress and the quality of life in the school, and they flourish due to the genuine trust and respect between staff and pupils. There are however a number of pupils, especially in lower ability groups at KS3, who find it difficult to sustain concentration for long periods of time. This situation is exacerbated where teaching strategies are inappropriately employed, and further difficulties arise due to the size of some classes.

Behaviour management in the school is good. There is a good policy, and it is well led by a member of the SMT, who works tirelessly, with vision and empathy, to motivate and stimulate pupils' imagination. Together with heads of year, he ensures consistency and fairness of application and successfully creates an atmosphere where good behaviour is expected, received, recognised and rewarded. The appointment of two behaviour co-ordinators this year, funded by the Unitary Authority (UA), has produced a new focus on those pupils who are disaffected or suffering from low self-esteem, bringing concern and understanding, and it is making a good impact on the lives of these pupils. The school diary also assists in behaviour management.

The attitude, commitment and behaviour of the sixth form are good, and these students are good role models for the younger members of the school community.

The anti-bullying policy is good. It is a regularly updated document and successfully addresses concerns regarding any form of discrimination. Should issues arise, pupils feel that they are quickly and efficiently resolved befitting the ethos of the school.

In the last year the school has excluded 12 pupils on a temporary basis and two permanently. All these exclusions were appropriately documented and procedures followed.

4.3 Attendance

The school achieves satisfactory levels of attendance, generally in excess of 92 per cent, and this shows a slight improvement over the previous inspection. Attendance in both KS3 and KS4 is satisfactory across all year groups and unauthorised absence is low.

The school recognises the contribution of attendance and punctuality towards good order and effective use of time, whilst also providing a lesson for life. There are however a number of pupils in all year groups whose attendance gives rise for concern, below 90 per cent, which affects one in five pupils. This is unsatisfactory, and the education of these pupils is adversely affected.

The attendance policy is good, providing clear guidelines on all procedural aspects. It is well managed by a member of the SMT, together with heads of year and support staff. This dedicated team works diligently to promote good attendance and is alert to the issues that adversely affect attendance levels. They know their pupils well, their backgrounds and motivations, and demonstrate concern and understanding for those pupils who have problems whilst at the same time working vigorously to improve levels. The school diary, used effectively by all form tutors, and parents, constantly raises the profile of attendance. However the whole school target of 100 per cent attendance is unrealistic and consequently ceases to be productive. The new Educational Welfare Officer (EWO) is beginning to make an impact in the school.

Form tutors complete registration efficiently, in line with regulatory procedures, and work assiduously, linking with parents, to correctly categorise absence. Attendance management involves the use of an Optical Mark Reader (OMR) system run by a number of the administrative staff. This system presents many opportunities for analysis across all aspects of attendance. However it is not used effectively, nor interrogated on a regular basis to produce prompt and meaningful reports, upon which remedial action can be based.

Punctuality at the start of the school day is satisfactory, and is regularly monitored by heads of year. In the main punctuality to lessons is also satisfactory, with some delays after assembly and after lunch.

Sixth form attendance is good and six-weekly reports to parents highlight levels and place a strong emphasis on students' attendance. Lesson registers are accurate and ensure that the school is aware of who is on site at any point in time.

5. QUALITY OF EDUCATION

5.1 Teaching

The quality of teaching was at least satisfactory in 93 per cent of classes observed. It was good in 58 per cent and very good in a further 11 per cent. The quality of teaching is highest in the sixth form, where it was judged to be good or very good in 87 per cent of classes observed. Teaching is better at KS4 than KS3. There is a higher proportion of satisfactory, and some unsatisfactory teaching at KS3. However, overall, the quality of teaching, good or very good in nearly 70 per cent of classes is high and exceeds the national target for 2002 of 50 per cent. The seven per cent of unsatisfactory teaching does not quite meet the target of five per cent.

Teaching is good overall in English, mathematics, information technology, geography, modern foreign languages, music, drama and vocational education, with some very good teaching in all of these areas. Teaching is also good in Welsh.

Teachers are well qualified and deployed to teach their specialist subject. They have good knowledge of their subject and of the course requirements. However, not all have a sufficiently broad view of recent developments in teaching strategies, or a sufficiently wide vision of current good practice in schools generally. Consequently, a small minority of lessons have a narrow range of teaching techniques which do not encourage pupils to take responsibility for independent learning, creative thinking or problem solving.

The strength in the quality of teaching is teachers' great commitment to their work, to the individual pupils they teach and to the school. They are very hard-working and caring, and generous in the time they give to pupils outside curricular time. Their commitment to regular assessments at all key stages and subsequent support to any who are not making sufficient progress are at the heart of the school's improved standards, and caring ethos.

Whole-school planning at KS3 of the modules and assessments and sharing this with pupils are unusually well-developed, through the vision and drive of a member of SMT. On occasions this framework can seem restrictive and teaching geared to assessments. However, it has many benefits and teachers clearly adapt it to suit needs. Schemes of work within departments are also well planned, though planning for key skills across the curriculum is not yet consistently carried out, without a whole-school policy on literacy and numeracy. The planning of the use of ICT to raise standards within subjects is not yet developed in several core and foundation subjects, though it is integral in vocational education. Individual lesson planning is thorough.

A key feature of all lessons is the very good relationships between teachers and pupils. Discipline is based on mutual respect, within a relaxed yet purposeful atmosphere. Expectations are that good behaviour is the norm, and only in a few lower sets is there less than good behaviour. Teachers also have high expectations of pupils' achievement. Much

praise and encouragement are given, with rewards; conversely, when needed, sanctions are used.

The extent to which teachers set appropriately challenging work for pupils of different abilities varies somewhat between departments and between individual teachers within a department. Whilst there are high expectations of pupils, the tasks set do not always enable those expectations to be fulfilled. For example, the register of language used in some of the booklets provided is too difficult for some lower ability pupils and prevents them from understanding the nature of the task. Conversely, booklets used in some lessons demanded only short responses and restricted opportunities for extended writing from the most able pupils. Teachers' presentations can also restrict opportunities for extended speech by pupils, when questioning demands only short answers and does not probe understanding. In departments where there has been regular observation of classroom practice by all teachers within that department, the quality of teaching is higher and more consistent. Good practice is discussed and disseminated. Overall, however, there is a generally good match between the work set and pupils' abilities, as work is adapted to different sets or bands.

The school is generally well resourced and teachers make good use of resources. Books, school-produced booklets and practical equipment are used to develop pupils' knowledge and skills. Audio-visual aids form part of teachers' presentations and the recent acquisition of a few whiteboards will add ICT technology to the range of resources. There are few computers in departments and ICT is not sufficiently embedded in the work of a number of departments at present. However, teaching in music and teaching in vocationally based courses are exemplars of good practice in the extent to which new technology can advance learning.

The teaching in sixth form courses is of a high standard. Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning, are challenged to show initiative and are treated as responsible young adults. Assessment is regular and individual support is readily given. The methodology by which students are encouraged to think independently, debate, analyse, discuss and solve problems is usefully extended to classes lower down the school in some departments but not yet all.

Overall, teaching is a real strength of the school and a key factor in its high achievement.

5.2 Assessment, Recording and Reporting

Procedures for the assessment and recording of pupils' work are good. The quality of reporting of pupils' progress is satisfactory overall. The school policy has recently been reviewed and has appropriate principles and aims. Department policies for assessment, recording and reporting are generally in line with the school policy.

All subjects in KS3 follow a modular curriculum which is assessed every half-term. Comprehensive documents are given to parents outlining the topic to be taught in the module and details of homeworks to be set. Details of the assessment tests, specimen questions and guides for revision are also included, and in a number of subjects outcomes are linked to level descriptors. Pupils' work, including assessment tests and homework are usually well marked. In most subjects, constructive and accurate marking includes helpful comments indicating pupils' strengths and weaknesses. Each term pupils record all assessment and effort grades in a personal development plan. This is the basis of regular reviews with form tutors when target grades are set for each subject. Where there is considerable underachievement, heads of year interview individual pupils to reinforce the targets set and monitor progress carefully. The process of self-assessment is developing within the school. It is very good in English and music.

Teachers keep suitably detailed records of pupils' progress. Departmental records are generally complete and accurate. Detailed central records are maintained with all assessment marks and

target grades regularly updated. Departments use data very effectively and utilise a range of strategies to ensure that pupils on level/grade boundaries achieve the higher outcome in all examinations.

In the sixth form, there are regular assessments and a report is generated every half term from each subject teacher. The students are interviewed by form tutors about once a month, and the assessments are used to highlight targets for the following half term.

The school meets statutory requirements for reporting to parents. In Years 7-11, it issues an interim report and one full report a year. The interim report issued at the end of the Autumn term includes test marks, effort grades and attendance figures. The full report includes details of all assessments undertaken throughout the year, effort grades and comments on progress made in the subject. A minority of subject reports give specific targets for improvement. In other subjects targets are too general, and do not give sufficient information or advice on ways of improving achievement. In a number of subjects, the comments on the report do not reflect the detailed knowledge the teacher has of the pupil. A Parents' Evening is arranged for all year groups, when targets are set.

Pupils with SEN have individual education plans (IEPs) in line with the Code of Practice. Statements are reviewed annually with parental involvement.

The well organised system of Records of Achievement (RoA) is used effectively to celebrate and promote achievement and to emphasise the positive progress made by each pupil. Pupils are encouraged to summarise their achievements and activities in school and in the community. The final document is valued by pupils.

The school's analysis of data is good and has a positive impact in setting targets and improving pupils' performance. Assessment data at the end of KS2, KS3 and each half term are carefully analysed to review individual targets. There is regular dialogue at all levels to update targets for pupils and individual subjects.

5.3 Curriculum

At KS3, in addition to NC subjects, pupils study drama. Time for the core subjects is generous. However, the organisation of the curriculum at KS3 is unsatisfactory, providing insufficient time for the subjects of Welsh, French, history, geography, music and art to meet NC requirements. Provision varies between groups because of the inconsistent lesson lengths, which adversely affect standards in all key stages, and particularly in KS3, where there is also a high proportion of classes shared between teachers. Curriculum content is fully shared with parents and pupils, through comprehensive modular plans in all subjects, which link a year's course content to homework assessments and copies of which are given to all pupils. Links with feeder primary schools are strong with some cross-phase curricular projects (for example, ICT, English and mathematics).

Outcomes in pupils' key skills of literacy and numeracy are at least satisfactory and often good but planning across the curriculum is under-developed. Separate literacy lessons are decontextualised and ICT is not a regular feature in the work of subjects. The timetabled library lessons allow pupils to access the library resources, including computers, supported by booklets which set research tasks, but the lessons are unsatisfactory in quality, lacking the 'guidance' specified in the school's aims. Several groups in KS3 are large, containing 32 or more pupils, and there is significant gender imbalance in some sets. There are some restrictions as a result of setting and time allocations in KS3, which militate against pupils in Sets 4 or 5 choosing their subject at GCSE, for example Welsh, modern foreign languages and art.

The KS4 curriculum is satisfactory. There is a clear vision of curriculum continuity from KS4 to the sixth form and higher education, as a pathway to the future. A particularly good feature

is the breadth of courses, in which a wide range of vocational qualifications is offered to pupils of all abilities. Entry for GCSE English Literature is, however, limited to two groups, thereby reducing the numbers of pupils in the school for whom English A level is an option. Subjects have generous provision at KS4 but all are affected by the inconsistent lengths of lessons. There is insufficient time for Welsh to meet statutory requirements. Provision for personal and social education (PSE), careers, sex education and religious education meets statutory requirements in KS3 and KS4.

The breadth, balance and relevance of the curriculum in the sixth form are good. The school has actively pursued its aims of encouraging all pupils to continue their studies in the sixth form by providing and reviewing appropriate programmes of study. There is a very good range of vocational courses, successfully incorporated into an option system which is very popular with students, including the growing numbers who join the school in the sixth form, and provides an effective route into a range of higher education courses for students of different aptitudes. There is a designated area for sixth form study in the library, including very good access to computers, and homework assignments from a range of subjects include research using ICT. The school does not meet statutory requirements for the provision of religious education in the sixth form.

Most pupils designated as having special needs are taught in small groups where they are given tuition by subject specialists, which enables them to access a broad curriculum and achieve high outcomes in examination results. Resources to support literacy, such as Successmaker, are available to pupils from all groups outside timetabled lessons. The school's caring ethos promotes inclusivity outside lessons, involving all pupils in charity events and projects. Some subjects (for example, art, music and English) incorporate awareness of other cultures in the curriculum but this, and the *Cwricwlwm Cymreig*, are under-developed across all key stages.

Extra-curricular activities are good, including high quality drama productions, orchestral and choral groups, competitive sports teams and foreign language exchanges. The focus on examination standards through the school's 'raise a grade' campaign includes extra-curricular clubs, which successfully support pupils in improving their performance in particular subjects.

5.4 Support, Guidance and Pupils' Welfare

The school takes its responsibilities for the support and guidance of pupils very seriously providing very good support. Teachers know their pupils well and very good relationships encourage pupils to engage in open discussion with teachers on a variety of topics. The role of the form tutors is well developed. They have responsibilities for their own groups but are also part of year teams led by the heads of year. They meet regularly to share concerns and consider future actions. Tutors stay with groups as they move through the school enabling them to build effective relationships with pupils. They have very good information on academic progress, pupils' strengths and weaknesses and concerns both within the school and outside. Staff encourage good attendance in the sixth form and actively seek to broaden the experience of pupils new to the school. The school community plans and provides a range of opportunities to expand personal interests and experience through a range of extra-curricular opportunities and through the PSE programme delivered within the religious education curriculum. Throughout the school, teachers communicate their commitment to social inclusion.

When issues occur, parental involvement is considered key to the development of effective support strategies. Form tutors and heads of year work closely with parents and, when necessary, outside agencies to address concerns. When necessary, the EWO and social services work effectively in partnership with the school and parents to address wider social, behavioural and attendance concerns with all partners monitoring progress carefully. The nominated teacher/officer for behaviour and child protection is well known to staff and used

very effectively. Child protection procedures are in place complying with Welsh Office circular 52/95.

The school has developed a very comprehensive and thorough system for informing parents and pupils of the work covered and the expectations of the school and individual departments. Departments monitor the progress of pupils regularly through the assessment system and identify areas for development, which pupils record in individual personal development plans. Progress against the targets set is monitored by subject teachers and form tutors who make themselves available to discuss work with pupils as required. Members of the SMT monitor the whole process effectively, checking homework diaries and discussing progress with individual pupils in both formal and informal situations. The school provides very comprehensive information for parents on the work covered through the coursework/private study booklets which each pupil takes home. These contain detailed information and additional private study opportunities allowing parents to be fully involved in helping and guiding their children through their academic study.

The SMT provides good guidance in phases of transition in Y9 and Y11. Initial investigations of career choices occur in an information technology module in Y8 and the SMT interviews all pupils individually in Y9 to discuss their future ambitions and aspirations and appropriateness of option choices for examination study. Sixth form choices are discussed extensively in school and at a sixth form evening. Careers advice is provided through an external careers officer who arranges individual interviews for discussion on the range of work, apprenticeship, further education and school based opportunities available. For those choosing work routes the school has good links with local firms and industry.

Arrangements for the safety of pupils are good. The introduction of CCTV has resulted in monitoring of movements on site effectively. Fire drills are held regularly with additional 'mini drills' at the start of the academic year for the new intake in Y7 and students joining the sixth form. Arrangements for the regular checking of fire equipment and alarms are thorough. Should medical concerns arise there are appropriate arrangements for care and any necessary follow-up in cases of emergency. The arrangements for ensuring the safety of pupils off site in physical education lessons are very good involving good arrangements with other facility providers and the use of mobile phones on remote sites to ensure contact with school at all times. Departments take care to manage the quality of their equipment and facilities. Risk assessments are completed and reviewed regularly. The school tries to address issues as soon as possible although some facility issues require long-term solutions. A few health and safety issues raised during the inspection were identified to the school.

5.5 Provision for Pupils with SEN

Provision for 21 pupils (2.0 per cent of number on roll) with statements of SEN and a further 100 (10 per cent) at School Action (SA) and School Action + (SA+) is good in the learning support department.

Distinct groups of approximately 16 pupils with SEN across both key stages are taught by mainstream staff in a wide range of subjects in line with the requirements of the NC. The same groups are taught English and mathematics by specialist SEN teachers in the SEN base area. Pupils with specific learning difficulties receive support from the County Dyslexia Service. A tutor visits school three days per week.

Standards achieved in English and mathematics at both key stages are good and pupils make progress. Pupils are focused and respond well to the work which is carefully matched to need. However teaching sometimes lacks variety to sustain pupils' interest.

A clear SEN policy outlines the department's objectives and implementation of the Revised Code of Practice 2002 is in evidence. The school's SEN policy is delivered in the Governors' Annual Report to parents and mention is made in the school handbook.

At KS4 pupils are entered for GCSE/General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) and Certificate of Educational Achievement (COEA) religious education. The success that the department has had over recent years is commendable.

At KS3 the majority of pupils are entered for NC tests.

Both staff who teach in the department have appropriate SEN qualifications. Three learning support assistants (LSAs) offer valuable help within the department. They take responsibility for the directed learning packages and their positive attitude does much to raise pupils' achievement as well as self-esteem.

The Special Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) has overall responsibility for special needs throughout the school. In spite of inadequate non-contact time, the SENCo manages the department effectively. Efforts are made by the SENCo to keep mainstream staff fully informed of pupils with SEN. However there is no designated SEN representative from each department who meets the SENCo on a formal basis. Because of this, the good practice within the SEN department is not reaching the wider school and opportunities to raise pupils' achievement are being missed.

There is a comprehensive system for writing IEPs which are available to all staff on the school internal computer network. The IEPs offer a set of manageable targets, clarifying what needs to be done in the short term to raise pupils' achievement. Evidence indicates however that not all mainstream staff make this subject specific. In this regard a valuable tool which sets out the steps for progress and evaluation is not fully utilised. However progress has been made in this area since the last inspection. Individual Educational Plans now focus more concisely on individual need. This now needs to be developed in the wider subject area.

A referral system operates and mainstream staff liaise with the SENCo if they have concerns about pupils' progress. Parents are kept fully informed and encouraged to help with homework.

Identification, assessments and reviews of progress are regularly undertaken. Appropriate intervention strategies are in place so that pupils are supported early in their school life offering greater opportunities of success at a younger age before difficulties become entrenched. Cognitive Ability, Reading and Spelling tests are used to screen pupils.

A governor with responsibility for SEN is correctly appointed and offers support through regular meetings with the SENCo.

Sanctions are in place to deal with inappropriate behaviour. However support offered for vulnerable youngsters by the Educational Psychologist and EWO is inappropriately seen as punitive in the list of sanctions in the homework diary.

A departmental development plan is appropriately matched with whole school priorities and positive efforts are being made to lift staff awareness that SEN is everyone's concern.

Evidence shows that some issues of timetabling do cause problems. Where lessons are shared between staff, planning for progression and building on previous pupil success becomes difficult. The length of time between lessons as evidenced in French causes difficulty for pupils who find it hard to recall what has been taught previously. There is also evidence that two lessons together in one subject causes difficulties for pupils who find it hard to focus for long periods of time.

There are good links with outside agencies notably the SEN careers officer, Speech and Language Service, Pontypool College and the Hearing Advisory Service. Links with primary schools are in place.

Pupils with SEN are encouraged to take part in a number of extra-curricular activities. A "Buddy Reading System" operates and evidence indicates that this is raising achievement and helping pupils with social interaction.

The SENCo is aware of the document "Building Excellent Schools Together" (BEST) and has reviewed the department in the light of this.

Progress has been made since the last inspection and areas of weakness have been addressed. The good practice evidenced within the department now needs to permeate to the wider school.

5.6 Partnership with Parents and Community, Schools and Other Institutions

The school's partnerships with parents, community, schools and other institutions are good.

There is a good, mutually supportive partnership between home and school that is enhanced by the school diaries which are diligently completed and highly effective as a communication channel on all aspects of education. Parents readily recognise and appreciate the caring stance adopted by the school, the open door policy and the commitment of all staff in addressing parental concerns. Good information is provided by the school including coursework guides, good reports and newsletters. Whilst the prospectus and annual governors' report are informative neither fully comply with the new Circulars 14/01 and 15/01, a matter rectified in the new prospectus being compiled. Some parents are involved in the life of the school. However the skills of the parental database are not harnessed to support the curriculum. The Parent-Teachers Association (PTA) raises funds for the school but the wide catchment area inhibits regular social activities.

Community links are well established and, befitting the ethos of the school, charitable activities are strong, both locally and internationally, stressing to pupils the importance of giving, and not just receiving. In most subject areas the local community, and places further afield, are utilised to enrich pupils' education and provide an understanding of their local environment and the world at large.

Transition is well established with the school working effectively within the cluster group. The head of Y7 and the SENCo manage the programme to ensure that progression is both caring and sympathetic, making for easy movement into secondary education. Appropriate visits to the school are provided for both Y5 and Y6 pupils, sensible information is exchanged and bridging activities are in place in literacy, numeracy and ICT.

The school enjoys a working agreement with the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff and provides training opportunities for student teachers. The programme is well organised and effectively monitored. These students gain good experience of school life, and bring skills to the school, which add benefits to pupils' learning.

5.7 Partnership with Industry

The school has good working partnerships with industry, which it utilises to provide pupils with a good understanding of the world of work, and the necessary skills, determination and confidence for success in the job market. The good policy document provides the impetus for the ongoing development of further partnerships to ensure that pupils gain an understanding of the changing industrial and technical nature of society and their place within it.

Careers educational guidance is part of the personal development programme, and contains many good aspects, effectively delivered by keen staff members. It plays a positive role in

work related education. However, no discrete careers lessons are undertaken in the curriculum, and consequently it is difficult to ensure consistency of information for pupils. Furthermore those involved in managing aspects of the programme do not meet as a team to monitor and evaluate effectiveness.

In KS3, ICT is used effectively to allow pupils to interrogate databases, for careers information, and to practise completing application forms. In Y9, the good enterprise week presents an opportunity for groups of pupils, 12, to spend three days in a company devising and marketing a product and service. This activity is well managed, ably supported by a good range of business mentors, and makes an effective contribution to the key skills of communication, problem solving, teamwork and the application of both number and information technology.

Work experience is undertaken in Y10, when all pupils work in placements, organised by the head of work experience, for two weeks. This good programme gives pupils useful experience of the working world, and the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed in the job market. Pupils are mentored before going to site, monitored on site and their experience, and learning, subsequently evaluated. Also in Y10, 30 pupils are participating in the Duke of Edinburgh Award and are given impressive opportunities to demonstrate self-sufficiency, independence and to 'own the problem'. These are good lessons for life. 60 pupils altogether, last year, gained experience through the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme

'Careers Wales' plays a prominent part in careers guidance, offering good support throughout Y11, and in the sixth form. Individual interviews take place with all pupils and pupils gain from the independent and impartial advice from the careers adviser. These interviews assist in career choices and options.

Industry links are used across many subject areas, assisting in the educational programme, and have been effective in establishing work placements for staff.

6. MANAGEMENT

6.1 Quality of Self-Evaluation and Planning for Improvement

Self-evaluation and planning, at all levels within the school are at an early stage of development. The headteacher, in the year since his appointment, has introduced a number of appropriate initiatives and progress to date has been good. However, a culture of self-review and action planning is not yet embedded across all areas of the school.

The quality of the self-assessment report submitted by the headteacher for the inspection is testament to his detailed and comprehensive knowledge of the school, and vision for its future development. The individual strategies introduced for monitoring and planning in the last academic year have now been brought together into an annual cycle, with dates indicating how each will contribute to the whole. The number of staff involved in this management process has been widened and there are signs of a growing culture of regular review for development planning.

The headteacher, deputy headteachers and assistant headteacher each work with a number of departments to support, monitor and review progress. These links have been effective over several years in improving performance and examination results, and in planning for curricular developments. Senior management has shown an appropriate focus and drive on improving standards. They have also reviewed their own performance as a management team.

Governors have also carried out their role effectively in monitoring the school's performance and in strategic planning. The chairman and vice-chairman are regularly in school and know staff well, and some governors have attended lessons. School data are analysed regularly at meetings and governors have an "Away Day", off site each year, for strategic planning and

review. The breadth of vision, drive and commitment by governors are key factors in the school's continuous development.

The regular monitoring of classroom practice is not yet an intrinsic part of review and planning. There are a number of examples of good practice in classroom observation by the headteacher, SMT, some heads of department and by staffroom colleagues. As a result, action planning has taken place in some areas. Plans to extend monitoring are included in the SDP.

Monitoring of pupils' progress, of pastoral matters and of the site is very good. The communication systems are very good, supported by technology to provide useful data. However, the monitoring of pupils' progress is hampered by the lack of data, over the years, of all pupils' aptitudes on entry and at specific stages, making comparative progress difficult to assess. New systems are being introduced to add to the information available. Internal systems of assessment provide good information by which individual pupils can be identified and given extra support such as in the "Raise a Grade" programme.

Monitoring of the sixth form is also very good. Students' progress is kept under weekly review, with regular meetings between students and tutors and half-termly reports to parents. Other aspects of provision are also kept under regular review, and the growth of a range of qualifications has been an appropriate response to students' needs.

Pupils are involved in the process of review and development, to good effect. Through the pastoral programme they regularly assess not only their academic progress, but their personal development and their faith journey, and point to areas for future growth. Within subjects this process is much less consistent. There are some examples of good practice, English and music being exemplars.

Both long-term planning over a five-year period, and the planning for the current academic year have appropriately identified areas for development, initiatives, success criteria and costings. At a whole-school level, planning is very good. At middle-management level there are several good features. Planning is based on a detailed analysis of strengths and shortcomings, and there is a good correlation between the whole-school targets and the specific area for development. Not all plans are appropriately costed, however, and the success criteria are not sharp enough in some cases. However, a good start has been made, with an increasingly collaborative culture.

The analysis of data on a whole-school level is good, with a developing emphasis on baseline data against which to chart progress. At departmental level, there is less evidence of data being used to maximum effect, to plan for improvement, across all departments. In English, modern foreign languages and music there is much good practice.

Appropriate targets are set, for the school as a whole, for departments and for individual pupils. The steady improvement in the years since the last inspection attests to the success of this process, and the recently introduced initiatives augur well for further improvement.

6.2 Leadership and Efficiency

The improvement in standards and examination results since the last inspection and the strong, corporate ethos attest to the high quality of leadership. The school's aims of promoting high achievement in a caring community are widely fulfilled. Of the 248 parents who responded to the questionnaire, ninety-five per cent, on average, supported the school in all the questions - a high percentage. Whilst there has been evident progress overall, there has been limited progress in some of the key issues from the last report, and two remain key issues.

The new headteacher, in post for a year, has taken a leading role in establishing a culture of self-evaluation and developing a sense of teamwork, with more staff involved in the decision-making process. He knows the school well, has a clear vision of its future direction and shares

this with all involved with the school. The deputy headteachers, assistant headteacher and bursar work effectively as a SMT, with the headteacher, and also contribute substantially to the school's life and work. There is good integration between the pastoral and academic work of the school, with a proper emphasis on developing the whole person. However, the amount of non-contact time which members of SMT have for whole-school management is still relatively low, despite improvement since the last inspection.

Governors also show strong leadership. Strategic planning includes large-scale development of its facilities, and the monitoring and evaluation systems are effective. The chairman and vice-chairman of governors make invaluable contributions to the leadership of the school.

At middle management level, the quality of leadership is variable. There is much good practice, particularly in pastoral management, in the sixth form, and in music, modern foreign languages and vocational education. Development planning has begun in all departments, based on an analysis of strengths and weaknesses, and monitoring of classroom practice has begun. Not all heads of department have received sufficient INSET to enable them to fulfil all aspects of management but there is a good team spirit, with regular meetings in departments. In design and technology, aspects of the subject are not co-ordinated sufficiently, and there is insufficient co-ordination across the curriculum to promote literacy, numeracy, ICT within subjects and best provision for pupils with SEN.

Resources are generally well managed. Staff are deployed to teach their subject specialism across the age and ability range, though there is a significant minority of classes shared between two teachers, when this is not a subject preference, particularly at KS3. Resources of books and equipment are used well within departments, but the library is under-utilised as a resource base, and the stock is inadequate for such use at present. The very good provision of ICT facilities is used well for discrete lessons of ICT, in central resource areas, in vocational education, in music and in the SEN department. Other departments have little or no access to ICT facilities at hand, and do not book into the central resources on a regular basis, there being little opportunity for whole classes because of the growth in discrete lessons. By contrast, sixth formers use these facilities well, being able to access ICT in their free lessons. Time in individual lessons is used well. There are anomalies in the length of lessons, in the time given to different groups and in shortages of time to some foundation subjects. The time given to sixth form courses is also less than average. The available accommodation is used sensibly, with departments grouped, but there is a shortage of facilities for physical education.

The available finance is closely controlled. Funding in Torfaen in the secondary sector is below the Welsh average, and reserves were used in the last year to supplement the budget. Only a small surplus is projected in this financial year. Budget-setting is closely linked to the school development plan, with funding to departments based on both a formula and on development bids, thus promoting growth. Expenditure is tightly controlled by the bursar and by the vice-chairman of governors, on a regular basis. There are annual auditors' reports; the latest from the UA found that the school's systems and procedures were generally satisfactory and reliance could be placed upon them. The few recommendations were addressed.

The school runs smoothly, with good input from its support staff, including administrative, technical and site maintenance staff. Communication with parents is highly effective and contributes to the overall success of the school. The well-produced diaries are a regular means of communication, which pupils, parents and tutors use to good effect.

Statutory requirements are met apart from sixth form religious education, a daily act of collective worship for sixth formers and an appropriate amount of time for Welsh at KS4, in order that the course requirements can be covered.

6.3 Staffing, Accommodation and Learning Resources

Staffing

The level of staffing and their deployment to teach the curriculum offered by the school are satisfactory overall. There are 50 full-time teachers including the headteacher and one part-time teacher, giving a full-time equivalent of 50.4. This results in a pupil-teacher ratio of 19.5:1, which is significantly higher than the Welsh average of 16.5:1. The average class size in Years 7-11 is high at 25.8; in the sixth form it is 12.5. The teacher contact ratio including some supervision in the library, is 76 per cent, which is close to the national average for a school of this size. The delivery of the curriculum is enhanced by the employment of two language assistants, a dance instructor and seven peripatetic music teachers.

The vast majority of teachers have graduate qualifications, and 16 have experience of working in industry. The teaching staff has a good balance of experienced teachers and those new to the profession. There are four newly qualified teachers (NQT). The NQTs have a comprehensive programme of support led by a deputy head and supplemented by the departments in which they teach. The majority of lessons are taught by specialist staff. However, a small number of teachers teach more than one subject. In KS3, the deployment of teachers is barely satisfactory, with a significant number of classes taught by more than one teacher. The school hosts Initial Teacher Training students. They have an appropriate and detailed programme of support addressing all aspects of school life.

All members of staff have a job description, which in most cases is generic in nature. The allocation of additional salary points is appropriate for the responsibilities undertaken and the size of the school. Women teachers are well represented in posts carrying responsibilities. The allocation of non-teaching time is appropriate to the level of responsibility in most cases.

The INSET provision for teaching staff, middle managers and support staff is unsatisfactory. Although all members of the teaching staff have received training in the use of ICT, there have been insufficient opportunities for many teachers to develop their skills to the full and broaden their knowledge of good practice.

There are 16 support staff including the bursar, who is also a member of SMT. They include an assistant bursar, office and clerical staff, an information technology instructor, three classroom support assistants, two part-time librarians and two laboratory technicians. There is no technician support in the design and technology area.

Accommodation

The adequacy of accommodation for the number of pupils on roll and the curriculum provided is satisfactory.

Since the last inspection some improvements have been made to the buildings and to the environment of the school. This has enabled the school to generate extra teaching spaces and develop an impressive number of computer suites in a number of areas around the school. However due to the layout of the school, the majority of departments are still not in suites. Whilst there are improved facilities, especially in information technology, music and drama, serious shortcomings remain in a number of subjects. In physical education, the quality of accommodation is poor with the gymnasium needing extensive refurbishment, new flooring, storage and access improvements. In art, there is only one specialist room and little space for large-scale work, and in geography a large number of lessons are taught in non-specialist rooms. During the week of the inspection a few health and safety issues were reported to the headteacher.

The internal fabric of the building is satisfactory overall. There are some displays of good quality in classrooms and corridors, celebrating the efforts and achievements of pupils in

curricular and extra-curricular activities. However this is not consistent throughout the school and across subject areas.

During the last year, a 'Schools in Bloom' project was set up by the Bursar with the help of a number of pupils. This project has been successful in involving pupils in an extra-curricular activity and with improving the environment of the school.

Students in the sixth form have satisfactory facilities for private study and recreation. At the time of the inspection, there were no separate toilets for the sixth form. However a grant has been awarded for their construction which will begin immediately after half term.

The caretaker and the cleaning staff work hard to ensure a good level of cleanliness overall throughout the school. Although there is some litter after the lunch breaks, the caretaker works hard to keep the site clean.

Learning Resources

The provision of learning resources is satisfactory, overall.

The school's expenditure on textbooks, materials and educational resources is above the average for schools in Wales. This has ensured a good range of resources in English, modern foreign languages, art, mathematics, geography, science and hardware in the computer suites. However, there is a shortage of textbooks in physical education and teaching resources in Welsh, some texts in business studies are dated, and in design and technology computer-aided design/computer-aided manufacture (CAD/CAM) is an area which is very limited in terms of NC requirements.

Although the ratio of pupils to computers is very good at 4.75:1, there are insufficient ICT resources in most departmental bases. There are also difficulties in gaining access to the computer suites, and this limits the development of ICT across the curriculum.

The number of books in the library is significantly below the number expected per pupil for a school of this size; many are dated and there is a lack of reference material for research and extended learning. The library has a suite of computers in an adjoining room. These are well used by pupils during the lunch breaks and by sixth form students during study periods. The borrowing rate of books is low for a school of this size. The school has two librarians, who work on a job-share basis; they are both recently appointed and would benefit from further training. At present, this valuable facility as a resource for learning is not being used to its full potential.

7. SUBJECTS AND AREAS OF LEARNING

Standards achieved by pupils

English

Standards of achievement are good at KS3, and very good at KS4 and in the sixth form. Performance in NC tests is above the UA and national average. In 2001, results in GCSE English and English Literature were well above UA and national averages.

Good features

KS3

- Pupils participate in a range of oral activities, including pair and group-work, and show very good collaborative skills.

- Pupils with literacy difficulties follow a common scheme of work and respond to the challenge positively, giving prepared talks, reading aloud and giving short written responses to tasks.
- Encouraged and challenged by their teachers, pupils are developing technical vocabulary and formal expression.
- Pupils produce a very good variety of written outcomes, using different forms of note-making (for example, bullet points, mind maps) to analyse text and prepare for extended writing.
- Pupils' reading records show enthusiasm for wider reading, supported by helpful reading lists, which also guide pupils to books of an appropriate level, and by a wide range of departmental strategies.

KS4

- Pupils prepare at length for each piece of coursework, analysing texts in pairs and groups, making notes in various forms and contributing to class discussion before drafting a piece of extended writing.
- The written work resulting from this thorough preparation is of very high quality, and improvement is supported by consistent marking from all teachers in the department, who give a clear focus on GCSE criteria and associated targets, in their comments.
- Pupils show very good collaborative skills and are aware of the importance of oracy as teachers regularly make oral assessment opportunities explicit during a lesson.
- In their study of literature, pupils of all abilities show high levels of textual knowledge.
- All pupils enter GCSE English and the results of the small group of pupils with SEN are very good, sometimes as high as a C grade.

Sixth form

- Essays are of very high quality, showing very good, detailed references to texts and, particularly in the upper sixth, cogent arguments referring to critics' views.
- Students display a high level of independence, preparing sections of study for extended presentation to the group, and carrying out research tasks on the Internet, using the computers in the sixth form section of the library.
- Group discussions show very good collaborative skills and are frequently driven by students' contributions, with teachers prompting and challenging appropriately. Students engage with texts and with each other, deeply involved in the issues raised.

Shortcomings

- At KS3, curricular planning adversely affects continuity of progress. Separate literary lessons do not set skills in context and ten out of 17 classes are shared between two teachers.
- Departmental policy enters only two sets for GCSE English literature, thereby limiting pupils who can take A level English to the pupils in those two sets.
- Book stock in the library is poor and does not make a positive contribution to standards in English.

Progress since the last inspection

- Progress has been good. Standards of achievement and examination results show an improving trend and the department has introduced a variety of successful initiatives. Both

boys' and girls' achievements are above national average at KS3 but, despite introducing strategies to promote boys' achievement while maintaining girls', there is still a gap in achievement greater than that nationally. In 2001, 20 per cent more girls than boys achieved level 5 or more. There is a marked gender imbalance in the sets in KS3. In KS4 and KS5, there is no such marked gender gap in performance.

- Information and communications technology was a weakness in the last inspection and is still unsatisfactory, except in the sixth form, as there is no access to computers in English lessons.

Mathematics

Standards of achievement are good at KS3, satisfactory at KS4, and very good in the sixth form. Standards are generally better in pupils of average attainment or above, and in pupils in the special needs groups. Achievement in some intermediate groups is less satisfactory, particularly at KS4. In the national tests at the end of KS3 last year, 72 per cent of pupils achieved level 5 or better, with a significant number of pupils achieving levels 6 and 7. In GCSE over the past few years, the percentage of pupils attaining grades A* - C has been consistently around 50 per cent, the figure last year being 51 per cent. In the sixth form, both AS and A level results have been very good; last year there were seven A grades in mathematics at A level, and three A grades in further mathematics.

Good features

- Pupils consolidate their ability to do basic arithmetical operations. The work with number is good.
- The principles of algebra are developing well, particularly amongst the more able pupils. All pupils learn to draw and investigate the properties of geometric shapes at an appropriate level.
- Pupils learn how to collect, represent and interpret statistical data.
- Most pupils learn strategies for working out numerical problems in their heads.
- The majority listen carefully to instructions, and get on well with the individual tasks and problems set for them.
- The majority of pupils are very well behaved, and they produce neat and accurate work in their books.
- On the whole, pupils make sensible use of electronic calculators.
- In the sixth form, students work very hard and maturely; they organise their work carefully, using accurate and precise mathematical notation and processes in all parts of the work.
- Sixth form students take an active part in the lessons, and discuss issues in a mature and knowledgeable manner.

Shortcomings

- A significant number of pupils at KS4 are under-achieving. A small minority tend to lose interest in the lessons, and this can lead to disruptive behaviour.
- At KS3 and KS4, not all pupils' books are marked to the same degree of accuracy.
- Some pupils in the middle ability range at KS4 become bored because the pace of some of the lessons is too slow.

- Little use is made of information technology to enhance the pupils' mathematical knowledge, particularly at KS4.
- Pupils' attainment targets are not high enough; pupils in the middle ability group in KS4 need to develop more confidence to tackle mathematical problems.

Progress since the last inspection

- Since the last inspection there have been improvements in the attainment of pupils at KS3 and the sixth form. However, attainment has remained static at KS4. The use of information technology in teaching mathematics has not improved. Several new innovations have been introduced by the department over the last year or so, with the specific aim of maintaining standards at KS3 and the sixth form, and of improving standards at KS4.

Science

Standards of achievement are good at KS3, KS4 and in the sixth form.

At KS3, the percentage of pupils obtaining level 5 and above in the national tests in 2001 and 2002 was well above the national average. At KS4, the percentage of pupils gaining grades A*-C in the same two years was above the national average. In A-level examinations, a significant majority gained A-C grades, with all students achieving grades in this category in biology in 2002.

Good features

- At KS3, the majority of pupils have a sound knowledge and understanding of an appropriately wide range of topics covering all aspects of the NC.
- The majority of pupils can recall key concepts and ideas well, and apply them to a range of problems and applications in everyday life.
- Pupils develop satisfactory and sometimes good practical skills. Investigative skills are developed from Y7, so that by the end of the key stage investigations are generally of a good standard.
- Pupils with SEN make good progress relative to their abilities. They often use scientific terminology well to explain basic principles.
- At KS4, the majority of pupils have a detailed understanding of more complex principles developed in the key stage in life processes and living things, materials and their properties and physical processes.
- More able and average ability pupils at KS4 can often apply their understanding to a range of problems, many related to the application of science in a range of contexts in everyday life.
- At KS4, the quality of the vast majority of investigations is good, and sometimes very good for more able pupils. In these cases, the use of detailed scientific knowledge enhances the planning process. Extended writing is well developed in a significant number of these investigations.
- In both key stages, the majority of pupils make good use of mathematical skills in scientific contexts.
- Pupils work safely and collaborate well during practical work.
- In the sixth form, students follow courses at A/AS level in biology, chemistry and physics. The majority of students make good progress and have a good understanding of key

concepts. They can apply their theoretical knowledge and understanding to a wide range of problems in the three subjects.

- Investigative skills are well developed among the majority of students, with work submitted by some students for moderation being of a very good standard.
- The majority of students can apply their understanding of theoretical principles to a range of problems and practical tasks.
- In some investigations, there is evidence of detailed analysis and evaluation of experimental findings.

Shortcomings

- At KS3, a minority of average and lower ability pupils have a less secure recall and understanding of current and previous work. They find difficulty in applying scientific principles to a range of applications in everyday life.
- In some classes, with the deployment of more than one teacher, teaching the same module, progress is hindered so that the development of learning is restricted.
- At both KS3 and KS4, in classes observed, a minority of lower ability pupils make unsatisfactory progress and hinder the progress of others.
- At KS3 and partly in KS4, there was a significant amount of satisfactory teaching and one unsatisfactory lesson: this limited progress in some classes, so that pupils did not work to their full potential.
- At both KS3 and KS4, the use of ICT is under-developed.
- In the sixth form, a minority of students do not have a secure knowledge and understanding of certain topics, and have difficulty in applying some scientific principles in solving problems.

Progress since the last inspection

- The department has made progress since the last inspection.

Welsh second language

Standards of achievement are satisfactory at KS3 and unsatisfactory at KS4. In KS4 pupils follow the foundation level course and the percentage of pupils gaining a grade A* to C was five per cent in 2001 and 11 per cent in 2002. These percentages are well below UA and national averages.

Good features

KS3

- Pupils can provide correct, brief oral responses in whole class situations.
- Pupils' listening comprehension skills are developing well. The majority can record responses correctly in the target language.
- Able pupils, especially in Y7 and Y8 can use a good range of topic-specific questions and answers in groups and pairs, and they record their tasks on audio and video cassette.
- Able pupils read sentences, short paragraphs and prayers with clarity and meaning.
- Able pupils in Y7 and Y8 write correct phrases and short paragraphs using familiar language patterns.

KS4

- Pupils can write short sentences to express personal likes and dislikes.
- Able pupils can produce more extended written work, in line with GCSE guidelines.
- Most pupils can provide brief, correct oral responses using written prompts.

Shortcomings

KS3

- Most pupils' reading skills are under-developed in Y8 and Y9.
- By the end of the key stage, most pupils have not improved their writing skills and many pupils cannot produce extended, structured written pieces or use a varied range of sentence patterns.
- Extended oral responses are limited, especially in Y9.
- Many middle and lower ability pupils cannot recall language structures from previous topics due to current timetabling restrictions.

KS4

- Many pupils cannot read extended dialogues with confidence and fluency and most pupils' reading strategies are limited.
- Oral and written responses are not sufficiently extended and there is over dependence on teachers' prompts and work-sheets.

Progress since last inspection

- The satisfactory standards at KS3 have been maintained since the last inspection.
- At KS4, curricular provision for Welsh has improved, but many teaching groups do not receive sufficient curricular time to deliver the statutory Programmes of Study. This is having a marked effect on standards.

Design and technology

Standards of achievement at KS3 are just satisfactory overall, at KS4 are good and in the sixth form are very good. The results for GCSE design and technology systems and control examination for 2002 indicated that 66 per cent of pupils entered gained grades A*-C, which is above the national average. Results for 2002 at A level were good.

Good features

KS3

- Pupils demonstrate the ability to work in an orderly manner handling equipment to a good standard with a satisfactory regard to health and safety issues in most material areas, taking pride in their work to produce products with a range of good quality finishes.
- Pupils have an opportunity to produce a large number of products in a range of materials using a variety of processes but this is to the detriment of the development of their design skills; products produced demonstrate a satisfactory to good level of underpinning theoretical knowledge and understanding.
- Throughout their practical work pupils remain on task, demonstrate a good ability to follow instructions correctly to produce and assemble their products when working both independently and in teams; and in the discussion of their tasks pupils demonstrate a good ability to explain themselves using technical vocabulary.

- Over the key stage pupils demonstrate very good standards of ability in a variety of contextual tasks using Logicator software and peripherals to produce control system products.

KS4

- Pupils show confidence in their practical work and demonstrate an ability to use tools and equipment to a good standard when making their product outcomes; they take pride in their work to produce products finished to a good or very good standard.
- The underpinning knowledge and understanding of their theoretical work is demonstrated to a good standard in the processes used in both the development of their control circuits and in the casings for the products; tasks set are challenging and motivating for the age and ability of the pupils.
- The quality of the folio work of a significant majority of pupils is of a good standard but a small number of pupils fail to complete aspects of design; and when discussing their work pupils demonstrate a good understanding of the technical vocabulary and can explain their tasks to a good standard.

Sixth form

- Students demonstrate a very good standard of underpinning knowledge and understanding of the theoretical aspects of control systems to meet identified needs within a context both in their portfolio and product outcomes; design aspects of the A level work are of a particularly high level and clearly identifiable.
- Case studies of local industries demonstrate a very good understanding of the systems that operate within the business context.
- Process skills are demonstrated to a very good level in their practical outcomes and students use innovative circuitry to meet a perceived need; final product outcomes are of a good and very good standard, well finished and produced to meet the needs of an identified consumer target audience.

Shortcomings**KS3**

- The lack of technical support in the food area hinders the standards achievable by pupils, particularly the standards of hygiene and work area organisation; and due to the limitations of lesson time prevents pupils having an opportunity to discuss and evaluate final product outcomes.
- The practical organisation and time keeping by pupils during food lessons are unsatisfactory.
- Tasks related to certain systems and control equipment are often too challenging and complex for the age and ability of the pupils, particularly the younger ones.
- The teaching of design is unsatisfactory across most material areas in relation to the drawing up of specifications with measurable criteria that can be tested against for product evaluation, the production of final annotated drawings with clear dimensions, material testing and reasons for choice and identification of quality control procedures.
- Information and communications technology skills related to design and technology have a heavy emphasis on the application of control on products. Additionally pupils have little opportunity to develop CAD/CAM skills as part of a manufacturing process or to use diet analysis software to aid understanding of nutritional content of food products and diets.

KS4

- Good practice in design skills is not consistently applied in the areas of design specifications, final annotated drawings with clear dimensions identified, research work clearly analysed and presented and the application of industrial comparisons and procedures such as quality assurance, which would help to improve standards for less able and less motivated pupils.
- The use of ICT control software could provide greater opportunities for more able pupils to demonstrate innovative ability, and build on the considerable skills developed at KS3.

Progress since the last inspection

- A main area of improvement has been in the use of Logicator software to produce quality control system outcomes. Other material areas have maintained standards or have remained under-developed. Textiles are now taught within design and technology instead of art as in the last inspection. At KS4 the school has moved to offering only GCSE design and technology systems and control, a course which mainly appeals to boys and only a small number of girls at the present time. In the sixth form the school has moved to the design and technology systems and control course which builds on skills developed for GCSE. However, the small numbers of students taking these AS and A level courses does raise the question of sustainability longer term although student numbers, all boys, are rising.

Information technology

Standards of achievement at KS3 in information technology are very good, are good at KS4 and very good in the AVCE information technology course in the sixth form. Examination results for double entry Applied GNVQ information technology for 2002 indicate that of the 71 pupils entered for the examination, 75 per cent of the Intermediate candidates achieved grade equivalents of A*-C which is above the national average while only 27 per cent of Foundation level candidates passed at a GCSE grade equivalent of C-G. The examination results for 2002 show that of 30 students entered for A level equivalent AVCE information technology examination 87 per cent gained grades A-C which is above the national average.

Good features**KS3**

- Pupils demonstrate a good standard of skill development in a range of software applications including word processing, desk top publishing, spreadsheet, database and graphics applications combined with the use of Internet software,
- They integrate data from various software applications to produce outcomes of a good or very good quality, with all pupils working to their fullest ability range.
- The Internet is used for research work but the information gathered is edited to apply to a defined context; pupils demonstrate a very good standard of the use of technical vocabulary with very good understanding to explain software applications and what they have to do to achieve the tasks set.
- Assignment briefs give all pupils the opportunity to achieve to their highest potential and pupils work confidently and enthusiastically for the majority of tasks set demonstrating good standards of knowledge and understanding of information technology skills both in the use of the hardware and various software tool applications.
- At the end of the key stage, pupils are entered for key skills level 1 with 90 per cent of pupils gaining a pass grade. The more able pupils are also entered for the key skills level 2.

KS4

- Pupils work confidently with the hardware and software applications demonstrating a good underpinning knowledge and understanding in all aspects of their work; and well-planned sequential tasks build these skills in a wide range of software applications and allow a significant majority of pupils to achieve to their fullest potential.
- Information from a full range of software applications including the use of the Internet is integrated to a good standard to produce good or very good quality outcomes by a significant majority of pupils to meet a set assignment within a context.
- Project assignments are completed to at least a satisfactory, sometimes good or very good standard by the majority of pupils.
- In their discussions pupils demonstrate a good standard of technical vocabulary to explain the processes and tasks they are undertaking.

Sixth form

- All students work individually to a very good standard on the set modular assignments demonstrating very good levels of skills and underpinning knowledge and understanding in their work.
- Video presentation work demonstrated very good integration of high level software applications in a variety of formats with students taking great pride, interest and enthusiasm in their work; Internet web design work incorporated very good research techniques to aid the production of complex web page design.
- Students confidently discussed processes and evaluation issues using very high standards of technical vocabulary and demonstrated a mature attitude towards their work; and assignments tasks identify clear grade requirements and student self-assessment procedures to help students achieve to their fullest potential.

Shortcomings**KS3**

- Assignment tasks for database applications need to be strengthened to ensure that all pupils have an opportunity to cover NC requirements to the higher levels.

KS4

- A significant minority (33 per cent) of pupils fail to complete assignments at Foundation level and their work is consequently ungraded.

Progress since the last inspection

- Departmental resources have greatly improved since the last inspection and this is clearly evident in the quality of the work produced by pupils. The department has introduced a scheme of work that not only meets NC requirements but allows it to enter a significant majority of pupils into the Key Skill level 1 and 2 examination by the end of KS3 with 90 per cent gaining at least a level 1 pass. The numbers of pupils taking the double entry Applied GNVQ examination continues to rise at KS4. The sixth form students have easy access to available resources and this is evident in the independent learning that ensures very good examination results. Students not taking the set examination are fully encouraged to improve their key skills level for information technology at least to a level 2. The department is fortunate to have very good technical support from a well-qualified technician.

History

Standards of achievement are satisfactory at KS3, good at KS4 and very good in the sixth form. Success rates at GCSE have declined over the past three years. The numbers of pupils achieving A*-C grades has fallen from 72.4 per cent in 2000 – well above both UA and national averages - to 64.3 per cent in 2001, which was just above UA and national figures of 61 per cent and 64 per cent respectively. The figure for 2002 was 58 per cent. Though entry numbers have been relatively small, A level results have been consistently higher than both UA and national averages over the last three years.

Good features

- At KS3, pupils demonstrate good subject knowledge that they use to produce well structured essay work.
- Pupils in Y7 have a sound grasp of chronology. They can sequence events in chronological order and show some awareness of anachronism. Pupils in Y8 understand that events have more than one cause and can comprehend and combine information from sources to investigate historical issues such as the murder of Darnley and the Gunpowder Plot.
- By the end of Y9, abler pupils are beginning to evaluate source material as evidence, for example in an investigation of the murder of the Romanovs or of Suffragette activities.
- The least able pupils and those with SEN achieve well when presented with active learning opportunities, such as interrogating census material or drawing inferences from visual source material.
- Pupils in Y10 make good use of a deepening contextual knowledge to propose an extended causal explanation of working class distress in the early 19th century.
- Most pupils in a Y11 class, preparing for a piece of coursework on anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany, show good understanding of the techniques of propaganda film makers and clearly understand that unreliable evidence may nevertheless be very useful.
- Students in the sixth form demonstrate high levels of reasoning. For example, in preparing for a coursework assignment on Chartism, students in Y13 can interpret sources relevantly

and in context, making good use of their extensive detailed knowledge of events. They understand that the value of source material as evidence is largely dependent on the circumstances of its production, and that explanations of actions require reconstruction of the predicament or point of view of the participants. They can also discuss critically the work of different historians and, when questioned, abler students can assess the relative importance of causal factors – for example in explaining the Napoleonic coup of 1851.

Shortcomings

- Pupils at KS3 in general do not have a secure understanding of the strengths and limitations of historical sources, which in turn limits their understanding of historical interpretations.
- Whilst most pupils at KS4 show keen insights, good levels of analysis and awareness of the tentative nature of historical evidence, some rely heavily on descriptive narrative or continue to regard sources as information to be accepted at face value.

Progress since the last inspection

- Some progress has been made since the last inspection. Shortcomings noted in the Programme of Study for Y9 and in coverage of the Welsh dimension in general have both been addressed. However, the range and variety of pupils' learning experiences remain limited.

Geography

Standards of achievement at KS3, KS4 and in the sixth form are good. GCSE examination results are well above the UA and national averages. A level results in 2002 were well above the Wales average grade.

Good features

KS3

- The majority of pupils across the ability range are competent in the use of atlases, statistical data, written texts and maps to enable them to acquire knowledge, understanding and subject specific skills.
- Pupils acquire a good range of geographical vocabulary with the majority applying key words with accuracy in a variety of geographical contexts. Year 9's work on desertification illustrated the pupils' ability to grasp and use new words with confidence and accuracy.
- Pupils exhibit a good knowledge of the location, features and characteristics of places which is well illustrated by Y8's work on the European Union and Y9's studies of the Sahel.
- The majority of pupils achieve work of quality and display good knowledge and understanding of basic geographical concepts.
- Pupils' key skills development is facilitated by the opportunity to complete extended written exercises, construct and interpret different types of graphs and the handling and use of maps. Year 7's work on four and six figure grid references using the 1:50,000 Ordnance Survey map was particularly good.

KS4

- Coursework projects based on river, weather and urban studies contribute significantly to the pupils' understanding of process in physical and human geography. The projects demonstrate the pupils' thorough grasp of the processes involved in the formation of patterns and features associated with river, atmospheric and urban activity.

- The majority of pupils are confident in the use and interpretation of statistical and numerical data. Year 11's work on cities in the more economically and less economically developed countries display good levels of accuracy and understanding in terms of historical development and rate of growth.
- Pupils are competent in the analysis and interpretation of geographical data with the ability to communicate their findings in a variety of formats, and where appropriate, with the support of ICT.
- Mapping and graphical skills are of a good standard accompanied by accurate application of geographical terminology.

Sixth form (Year 12 only)

- Students' files are systematically organized with neatly presented notes and diagrams, with maps and graphical work of a good standard.
- Written work demonstrates a good level of understanding and competence in the use of geographical vocabulary as displayed in the students' unit on tectonic activity.
- Students are able with confidence to extract the relevant material from primary resources. Their work on the forecasting of possible eruption, study of geological structures and the effects of volcanic eruptions on human and economic activities are particularly good.

Shortcomings

KS3

- Key Stage 3 pupils are not provided with the opportunity of developing their practical skills of enquiry, analysis and recording by means of structured fieldwork.
- The use of ICT within the classroom situation is limited.

KS4

- A minority of pupils' presentation of work is disorganized and untidy.

Progress since the last inspection

- Shortcomings identified in the last inspection have been satisfactorily addressed.

Modern foreign languages

Standards of achievement are good at KS3, KS4 and in the sixth form. In French and German, GCSE results are well above national averages. Advanced level results have included a number of top grades.

Good features

- Pupils and students make progress in each of the four language skills, through good teaching and regular assessment.
- The number of pupils continuing to take the second language (German) at KS4 and in the sixth form is good.
- At all key stages, the most able achieve well in relation to their ability.
- At KS3, pupils are confident orally and ready to ask and answer questions in full sentences.
- Extended writing develops from Y7, with appropriate attention to grammatical accuracy.
- Pupils with SEN achieve well.

- By KS4, pupils are able to use the foreign language as the natural means of communication in the classroom and respond in quick-fire question and answer sessions, as well as interacting in role-plays without prompts.
- Listening skills improve in KS4. Pupils are able to ascertain the gist of a conversation and pick out relevant details, making their own notes as they listen.
- Extended writing, in a variety of registers, is increasingly fluent and accurate.
- Pupils in KS4 read, with understanding, passages of increasing complexity and range of language.
- By the sixth form, students are fluent orally and able to make convincing oral presentations, debate and analyse, with a good injection of humour.
- Knowledge of grammar is secure and other language skills are well developed.

Shortcomings

- At KS3, pupils of average to lower ability have some difficulty in recalling previously learnt work in French, because of the shortage of time allocated to the subject compared to schools nationally.
- A relatively small number of pupils choose to take French at KS4, most from the top sets.
- ICT is not used on a regular basis to improve pupils' skills in languages.

Progress since the last inspection

- Good progress has been made. Standards and examination results have improved and the issues in the last report have been addressed.

Art

Standards of achievement are satisfactory at KS3 and good at KS4 and in the sixth form. Art is a popular subject at GCSE and attainment at grades A*-C of 91 per cent in 2001 and 79 per cent in 2002 places results above both national and UA averages. Within these, figures, only one student has achieved an A*. Standards of achievement are good at both AS and A level and art is an increasingly popular subject.

Good features

- Pupils with SEN achieve good standards at KS3 and KS4.

KS3

- Standards of achievement are satisfactory overall with some good work being produced by the most able.
- All pupils have sketch books which are well managed. They provide a successful link between home and school and serve to aid assessment and monitoring of progression.
- Progression is additionally guided by coherent and structured schemes of work, clearly contextualised with links to historical and contemporary examples of arts and crafts such as Celtic Knot, Illuminated Manuscript and the work of Georgia O'Keefe.
- Some pupils begin to make considered comparisons between the techniques of other artists and their own work.
- The mechanics of, for example, careful observation, use of pencil, line, form and colour are carefully taught. Most pupils respond very positively to this tightly prescribed structure.

KS4

- Standards of achievement are good overall with some very good work being produced by the most able.
- Skills of drawing and painting are explicitly taught and good standards are achieved.
- Portfolio and sketchbook work demonstrates some insightful responses to a variety of stimuli.
- Pupils are encouraged to use subject-specific terminology and to develop conceptual understanding.
- Pupils are given opportunities to investigate using a range of secondary sources and they are encouraged to make links.
- Cultural diversity and moral education linked to, for example, the photography of Peter Mengel provide pupils with a thoughtful starting point for advertising and Pop art investigation.

Sixth form

- Students demonstrate a diligent, mature and thoughtful approach to their work and they collaborate effectively.
- Effective use is made of historical and contemporary examples to stimulate personal and imaginative responses.
- Students are encouraged to develop work in a variety of media, including their own photographs, in two and three dimensions and on different scales: they tend to limit the range, however, to two-dimensional, small-scale work.
- Drawing and painting skills are explicitly taught using life and secondary sources and students are encouraged to evaluate and reflect on their work.
- Sketchbooks are detailed and demonstrate taught progression.

Shortcomings**KS3**

- Standards in the attainment targets of Investigating and Understanding are not as secure as they are in Making; opportunities to evaluate and respond imaginatively to the methods and approaches of the works of others in a range of different media are not fully exploited. The capacity for doing this is sometimes constrained by limitations of accommodation.
- For more able pupils, enrichment activities are provided but these are usually in the form of extension worksheets that are linked to Making rather than challenging approaches to Investigating and Understanding.

KS4

- An over dependence on secondary source stimuli from, for example, magazines and art books results in the dominance of two-dimensional work.

At all key stages

- Opportunities are not always provided for pupils and students to develop thinking skills that challenge responses to the work of other artists, their own work and that of their peers. At all levels, all students, including the most able, lack the confident capacity for insightfulness and openness to different interpretations.

- Pupils and students have limited opportunities to visit galleries to study original works of art, craft and design. Visiting artists and residencies are not fully utilised.

Progress since the last inspection

Progress since the last inspection is good.

- Numbers of pupils and students studying at KS4, AS and A level have increased and attainment is above both national and UA levels.
- The status of art in the school is improving: both capitation and time allocation have increased. However, the recommended allocation from the Qualifications Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales (ACCAC) for KS3 of 1.25 hours per week is still not being met.
- Extra-curricular provision such as Art Club and the development of display work around the school add to the more positive image.
- The recent installation of a kiln and the appointment of a part-time ceramics specialist is a positive development.
- There are still a number of problems with pupil groups at all key stages. At KS3, setting of pupils for art means that some groups have very unequal gender mix and groups are sometimes too large for practical work to be accomplished easily.
- The increased popularity of the subject means that large groups are being taught at KS4. Both AS and A level are taught together in a large group for one of their sessions.

Music

Standards of achievement are good at both KS3 and KS4, and very good in the sixth form. In 2001, all pupils entered for GCSE gained a pass at grades A*-G, and 91 per cent at grades A*-C. At AS level, all students gained a pass at grades A-D.

Good features

- Pupils respond enthusiastically in music lessons and perform confidently on a range of classroom instruments.
- Pupils demonstrate competence in both vocal and instrumental performances appropriate to their ages and ability.
- Pupils improvise and compose in response to a variety of musical stimuli.
- Singing skills are particularly well developed at KS4.
- Pupils appraise music from a broad range of cultures including that of Wales.
- Musical knowledge and understanding are acquired by direct engagement with practical activities at all key stages.
- The use and provision of ICT are particularly well developed at all key stages, especially when composing and in the recording and notating of compositions.
- Appraising and analytical skills are particularly well developed in the sixth form, with students communicating effectively using appropriate language and terminology when discussing and writing about music.
- Pupils at KS4 and students in the sixth form are progressing well in all aspects of their respective courses.

Shortcomings

- A minority of lower ability pupils at KS3 are insufficiently engaged in their work, and find it difficult to sustain concentration for long periods of time.
- At KS3, pupils of lower ability and those with SEN, fail to play in time to a common pulse and lack empathy with others when performing or singing in an ensemble.
- At KS3, the learning needs of a minority of individual pupils with SEN are not sufficiently recognised, particularly in Y8.
- Insufficient curriculum time is allocated to music at KS3.

Extra-curricular

- Pupils benefit from a wide range of extra-curricular activities. Several instrumental and vocal ensembles are organised by the department which reinforce its work and contribute greatly to the life of the school and the local community in general. There is a generous level of peripatetic instrumental tuition with good uptake by pupils. Pupils achieve good standards in these activities.

Progress since last inspection

- Standards of achievement have improved since the last inspection. The department has successfully addressed issues such as under-developed singing skills, insufficient time allocation to composing at KS3 and lack of direct engagement with the elements of music at both KS4 and in the sixth form.

Physical education

Standards of achievement in physical education are satisfactory at KS3 and KS4 and are good in the sixth form. GCSE results for 2001 and 2002 were well below national averages and below those achieved in many other subjects. In the sixth form the school provides vocational courses, the BTEC National Certificate in sport (performance and development) and in Y13, students are completing the BTEC National Diploma in Applied Science (sports studies). Sixth form results are good with the majority of students achieving the higher grades.

Good features

- Pupils of all ages arrive to lessons promptly and with kit, participate regularly and support extra-curricular and voluntary activities provided by the department.

KS3

- Pupils in Y7 and Y8 demonstrate a range of technical skills, knowledge and understanding of all aspects of physical education. They remember what they have been taught and try to apply what they know.
- Good standards are evident in gymnastics and rugby. Pupils show control and versatility in ball handling and in gymnastics are inventive in linking movements into sequences. Planning skills are good.
- By Y9, pupils show understanding of game principles and have appropriate knowledge of rules. They show good awareness and understanding of defensive play in basketball and netball.

KS4

- Pupils demonstrate understanding of rules and game principles in badminton. The most capable can vary shots, play to width and length and exploit weaknesses in others' play.
- Those following the GCSE course have a sound basic knowledge of the factors affecting fitness and qualities which enhance performance.

- Although girls are generally more confident in oral work, boys show particular strengths in using their knowledge of football and rugby to provide appropriate examples to support points made.

Sixth form

- Students of all abilities make good progress, developing skills of enquiry, research, collaboration and development planning as they move through the courses. They work effectively in teams and groups, share knowledge and expertise with outcomes indicating knowledge and understanding. The most capable lead discussions, make notes and explore a range of possible solutions to problems very effectively.
- They work hard to understand complicated work on cell structure in applied science and in group work, collaborate very effectively in applying laws and regulations to the organisation of sporting events.
- Written assignments are very well presented, the content is well researched with good use of diagrams from a range of sources to explain points made. Students use information technology effectively to enhance their work. Their records of progress and development of skills are up to date and reviewed regularly.

Shortcomings

- At KS3, tasks are not always targeted appropriately to challenge the full ability range.
- At KS3 and KS4, opportunities for pupils to plan their own solutions to problems and to comment on their performances or those of others are inconsistent. Pupils lack confidence in using technical terminology.
- In the sixth form, breadth of knowledge and experience are very limited. Few students read widely on the topics or explore issues as they relate to a wide variety of sports.
- The department copes very well with unsatisfactory accommodation. However in practical lessons, especially games, pupils' progress is handicapped by lack of adequate and easily accessible facilities. Time is lost in travelling to off site fields and the leisure centre, and conditions on site are often overcrowded or activities limited by inappropriate playing surfaces or lack of adequate indoor space.

Progress since the last inspection

- There has been progress on the issues raised in the last report, apart from an improvement to the facilities.

Religious education

This was inspected by the Diocesan Inspector.

Religious studies

This also forms part of the Diocesan Inspector's report.

Personal and social education

Personal and social education schemes of work are incorporated into religious education lessons. Comments on pupils' and students' personal and social development can be found in Section 4.1.

Drama

Standards of achievement in drama are good at KS3 and KS4 and are very good in the sixth form. GCSE results indicate that a substantial proportion gain the higher A* and A grades. In the sixth form there are opportunities for students to study to A level or to take the more vocational BTEC route. Standards achieved in both sets of examinations are good. There is good provision for drama throughout the school and the school has a very good reputation for the quality of its extra-curricular work.

Good features

KS3

- Pupils plan and prepare their work thoroughly. In the development of text there is evidence of maturity and sensitivity in addressing complex issues.
- The most able pupils use a range of dramatic techniques to provide sense and purpose to their work.
- Pupils work very effectively in groups with girls often taking the lead in organising others.

KS4

- Pupils make good progress in relation to their capabilities, listening carefully and concentrating on tasks.
- The most able show good insight when analysing text, identifying sub-text, discussing interpretation and development of character.
- There are good examples of pupils reading with understanding and fluency.

Sixth form

- Students benefit from additional professional tuition in specialist areas of singing, dance and technical support. All students are capable with some very talented individuals.
- In singing, they understand and apply principles of chord structure in creating harmonies with some innovative interpretations.
- Drama skills show good sustained characterisation, accuracy in mime and a range of dramatic techniques applied consistently within the group.

Shortcomings

- There are uneven opportunities for pupils to provide critical evaluation of their own work or that of others in either oral or written context.
- Written work, although often detailed and well considered, relies too heavily on information from the Internet.
- The department copes well with sometimes overcrowded accommodation restricting the range of activities available. Lack of technical resources, especially lighting in the studio limits opportunities to develop technical skills or to enhance performance.

Progress since the last inspection

- There has been good progress since the last inspection.

Electronics

Electronics is studied in the sixth form. Standards of achievement are satisfactory. In the 2002 A level examinations, three students were entered with two gaining grades in the A-E category.

Good features

- A minority of students had a good understanding of key concepts and were able to apply them to a range of contexts.
- The majority of students submitted coursework of a good standard, showing research into possible solutions, sub-system development and considering modifications to the system in the final evaluation.

Shortcomings

- A significant number of students had difficulty in applying the principles of an operational amplifier as a comparator in a range of problems to illustrate the application of the system.
- A number of students gained low marks in one module in the AS course.

Progress since the last inspection

- This subject was not reported on in the last inspection.

Home economics

Standards of achievement for GCSE home economics are satisfactory. The examination results for GCSE home economics for 2002 indicate that of the 15 pupils entered 40 per cent gained A*-C which is below the national average; however a significant minority of pupils entered were of lower ability.

Good features

- In their written theoretical work pupils are expected to produce fully explained answers and this re-enforces their subject knowledge and understanding and raises the standards of their achievements; pupils confidently discuss their work demonstrating a satisfactory level of technical vocabulary and knowledge and understanding of nutrition.
- Pupils demonstrate a satisfactory ability to make appropriate choices to meet the needs of tasks set demonstrating underpinning knowledge and understanding of the task requirements but some choices made are difficult to produce within the time limitations of the lesson and in line with their ability.
- A significant majority of pupils demonstrate a satisfactory ability to choose appropriate equipment and processes to produce food products to a satisfactory standard.

Shortcomings

- Standardised procedures for food hygiene, organisation of personal work areas and oven control need to be strengthened to ensure that all pupils adhere to these procedures throughout the lesson.
- Practical tasks set need to be monitored to ensure that pupil choice is achievable within the time limitations and ability range; all pupils need to be able to work to a fairly strict time plan and within their capability so that final outcomes can be produced to at least a satisfactory level and can be evaluated to identify areas for improvement.
- The use of ICT applications in areas such as diet and nutritional analysis would aid understanding and improve motivation in theoretical aspects of their work and would allow improved presentation of results in folio work.

Progress since the last inspection

- Home Economics was not reported as a separate subject at the last inspection.

Law

Standards of achievement in Law are good. The results of the first A level cohort were pleasing, with all seven candidates achieving A-C grades.

Good features

- Most students in Y12 demonstrate a sound basic knowledge of aspects of the legal system, for example the distinction between the main civil and criminal divisions, subdivisions of contract and tort and areas of overlap in particular cases.
- They can identify from a video reconstruction offences belonging to one or other category, justify their choices by reference to governing principles, such as negligence or duty of care and, for the most part, support their choices by reference to case law.
- By Y13, students' contextual knowledge has both broadened and deepened and a larger proportion of students can apply this knowledge when analysing actual 'scenarios' based on recent legal judgements.
- The written work of most of these students shows an ability to produce a well-structured argument – based, for example, on discussion of the relative merits of 'strict liability' – and arrive at a balanced conclusion.

Progress since the last inspection

- This subject was not taught at the time of the last inspection.

Sociology

Standards of achievement in sociology are good. There has been a steady improvement over recent years in both the number of students choosing to study the subject and in the results being achieved. In 2002, for example, 38 per cent of students gained grades B and C, compared with 2001, when no student achieved more than grade E. These results were achieved with the fourth largest subject entry and a relatively wide range of student ability.

Good features

- Most students in Y12 show a clear understanding of class identities and relationships and can articulate this understanding in thoughtful oral responses.
- They are able to set class and gender relationships – for example, the notion of hegemony – in appropriate historical contexts.
- They also understand the importance of empathy as a means of identifying cultural attitudes and values, and can explain how this, together with income and other factors, influences our definitions of class differences.
- The written work of students in Y13 shows an ability to evaluate various examples of sociological research, focusing particularly on the reliability and usefulness of the data used, and on the representativeness of findings.
- In oral discussion, some students in Y13 can analyse a range of current data – examination data, newspaper articles – to assess the effects of gender differences in educational attainment.

Progress since the last inspection

- There has been steady progress since the last inspection.

Vocational education**Business studies**

Standards of achievement are good at both KS4 and in the sixth form. Examination results at the end of Y11 are predicted to be above average.

Good features**KS4**

- Pupils have an increasing knowledge of skill development particularly ICT and can accurately identify targets for improvement.
- Written work enhances pupils' enquiry and research skills in addition to developing their analytical and recording techniques.
- Pupils' grasp of business and economic terminology is good with the majority able to apply key words with accuracy.

Sixth form

- The majority of students display a mature approach to their studies.
- Students' files are well organised with neatly presented notes, diagrams and graphical work of a good standard.
- The most able students respond well to the challenge in lessons.
- Students are able to interpret complex business data presented in a variety of formula and to analyse and advance arguments based on their findings.
- The ablest students use the language of economics confidently.
- Students are able to talk about the nature, management and manipulation of information and the structure of information systems in firms.
- The best students are able to initiate and sustain discussion about complex economic issues raised in class.
- They investigate and examine by argument, sift and debate and give reasons for and against a theory.

Shortcomings**KS4**

- There is inaccurate spelling of common words and subject specific words.
- Basic errors are not rectified in the re-drafting of work to improve accuracy and presentation.
- Pupils making written notes from sources do not transpose into their own words.

Sixth form

- In the least successful projects or assignments there are writing and spelling errors. These errors undermine the students' understanding and use of subject vocabulary.
- Students are not seeing the links with homework and the other work they are doing in the subject.
- The accommodation has little commercial ambience. This has an adverse effect on students' experience.

Progress since the last inspection

- The progress of business studies, since the previous inspection, is good. Since the previous inspection issues have been addressed by increasing the amount of emphasis on ICT, the investment in resources and there has been an appreciable increase in monitoring students' performance.

KS4 GNVQ Health and social care

Standards of achievement are good at both foundation and intermediate levels.

Good features

- Pupils gain an insight into the services provided by specific people working within this employment sector, and an understanding of the codes of practice which relate to the organisations where these employees are based.
- They gain an appreciation of the need to acquire good communication skills and to use appropriate vocational language.
- Portfolios provide evidence that pupils are capable of undertaking basic investigative work and of collating relevant information.
- They present the results of their investigations in the form of brief notes and illustrated essays.
- During lessons, they participate readily in group discussions and express their views in an open, coherent and sensible manner.

Shortcomings

- There is little evidence of the use or development of word-processing skills.

Progress since the last inspection

- Standards have been maintained since the last inspection.

Sixth form BTEC Health studies

Standards of achievement are good.

Good features

- Students acquire skills in researching, collating and analysing information regarding the organisations and roles of those people who work within the Health and Care employment sector.
- They study the development of identified client groups and analyse the various needs of those clients at different stages of their development.
- The majority of students participate actively in group discussions and express views which are reasoned and mature. They are tolerant to the views of others and cooperate readily in group activities.
- They benefit greatly from experiences acquired whilst undertaking periods of work with relevant employers in the area.

Shortcomings

- There is little evidence of the use of information technology for either word or data processing.

Progress since the last inspection

- Standards have been maintained since the last inspection.

Media studies

As a sixth form course, many students are accessing this type of study for the first time. Their backgrounds vary substantially but all make progress and standards are good. AVCE results for 2002 indicate a substantial proportion of students gaining the higher grades. Assessment processes and monitoring of course development and key skills are very good.

Good features

- In practical work on developing a media product, students consider their work carefully and work collaboratively to develop ideas into production pieces. Responsibilities are shared equitably and key aspects delegated appropriately.
- Students have used research skills, market testing and their own experiences to develop a product appropriate to the target audience. They draft and redraft their work, refining input and considering technical issues of quality, layout, use of font, colour, text and photographs.
- The most capable take lead roles, providing suggestions for development and when required, delegating roles and responsibilities to others. They talk fluently about product development using technical terminology appropriately and take on additional tasks to ensure completion.
- In work on cultural codes, iconography and symbolic representation of the film/video genre the most capable students are articulate and sometimes controversial in expressing their views. In the best examples they justify their opinions drawing evidence from a range of sources.
- The quality of written work reflects the range of abilities. The best examples are thorough, with detailed information and analyses. Students use information technology confidently and effectively.

Shortcomings

- The involvement of students varies substantially according to their abilities especially in oral work. Many lack confidence in expressing opinions, making little contribution.

Progress since the last inspection

- This subject was not reported on in the last inspection.

Leisure and tourism

Standards of achievement at KS4 and in the sixth form are good.

Good features

KS4

- There is a good level of understanding of the topic being studied with the majority of Y11 pupils pursuing the set tasks on investigating customer service with interest and enthusiasm.
- Information and communications technology presentational skills are of a good standard.
- Pupils make good progress within a well-structured course matched to their ability and interests.
- The majority of pupils are able to discuss the objectives of the unit of work, the investigative methods and the desired outcomes of their chosen customer service.

Sixth form

- Students work with interest and enthusiasm within a well-structured course.
- Assignments, coursework material and investigative tasks are well organized and neatly presented.
- Students' files display a good level of understanding and knowledge of the leisure and tourism industry particularly as applied to the local area.
- They exhibit a good grasp of the structuring of primary information gathering techniques such as questionnaires and surveys.

Progress since the last inspection

- The good standards have been maintained since the last inspection.

8. SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**8.1 Progress Since the Last Inspection****1. Update the SDP and set whole-school targets for academic achievement and attendance, and include detailed and costed plans for the development of Welsh at KS4 and beyond.**

The SDP is now a comprehensive working document containing plans for the next five years, and detailed plans for the whole school and departments for the coming year. Targets for attendance and academic achievement are set annually and there has been improvement in both these areas since the last inspection. The provision for Welsh has improved since the last inspection in that it is now a core subject at KS4. However, there is insufficient time for course requirements to be met and thus provision does not meet statutory requirements at KS4. There are no students currently taking Welsh in the sixth form. The school hopes that the planned introduction of the Welsh Baccalaureate will remedy this.

2. Improve the status and curricular provision of Welsh, music and art.

Time allocations for these subjects have increased slightly since the last inspection but they still have less time than in most schools. Welsh, in particular, is disadvantaged at KS3 as well as at KS4. Some shortage of time for art and music is more apparent in some groups than in others, because of the anomalies in length of lessons. The status of the subjects has, nevertheless, improved by more pupils and students opting for music and art at KS4 and in the sixth form, and by Welsh becoming a core subject. The growth of extra-curricular provision has added to their status. There is a range of opportunities in music, and an annual Eisteddfod.

3. Analyse more closely the reasons for lower achievement of boys, with a view to improving their performance in external examinations in most subjects, particularly English.

There has been good progress on this key issue, as boys have been more successful than girls overall in external examinations in recent years, contrary to the national trend. In English, in 2001, at GCSE, there was less of a gender gap in performance than nationally. Only at KS3, in English, do boys achieve much lower than girls.

4. (a) Continue to monitor and improve pupils' attendance and ensure that all lessons start promptly.

Attendance levels have improved since the last inspection and the overall figure for each of the three terms prior to the inspection was over 90 per cent. Attendance is monitored by form tutors and heads of year, with poor attendance quickly identified and action taken, in

conjunction with support from the EWO. Registration in the afternoon is now completed by the teacher of the first lesson, to encourage a prompt start to the afternoon. In lessons observed, most started promptly, though pupils sometimes have some distance to come, from other areas of the site. After assembly and after lunch, some lessons started late, however.

(b) Eliminate, wherever possible, differences in teaching time for pupils in the same year group (by extending the shorter times).

The overall teaching time has been extended to 25 hours, in line with national guidelines. However, there is still disparity between lessons lasting one hour, and lessons which last forty minutes, resulting in differences in overall teaching time between groups.

5. Extend and make more explicit the role of form tutors in the monitoring of pupils' personal development and academic progress.

There has been very good progress on this issue. Pupils have diaries in which they record assessment and effort grades and personal development plans, which they write with the support of form tutors in tutorial time. Sixth form students have regular interviews with their tutor, based on feedback from subject teachers to form tutors.

6. Improve the visual environment of the school.

There has been an on-going programme of refurbishment, and sections of the accommodation provide a very attractive environment. However, there are other areas which are drab or which have deficiencies and the school has plans to improve the site, involving large capital expenditure. Meantime, pupils have been involved in improving the environment as their entry for the 'Schools in Bloom' competition.

8.2 Key Issues for Action

In order to build on its current achievements the school should:

- Continue to improve standards generally and, in particular:
 - In those subjects and key stages where standards are satisfactory
 - In Welsh at KS4
 - In ICT across the curriculum.
- Increase the opportunities for staff development in order to:
 - Improve the quality of teaching, at KS3 in particular
 - Widen the range of teaching strategies through monitoring and the sharing of good practice
 - Develop the management role of heads of department.
- Re-examine the curriculum and timetable in order to:
 - Increase time at KS3 for some subjects, as detailed in the full report
 - Increase time for Welsh at KS4
 - Eliminate inconsistencies in time allocations between groups, and in the distribution of lessons within the fortnightly cycle
 - Reduce the number of classes shared between teachers.
- Continue to improve the accommodation in general and, in particular:
 - Facilities for physical education

- The library as a resource base.
5. Meet statutory requirements with regard to the daily act of collective worship and religious education for sixth formers and resolve the few health and safety issues reported to the school.

APPENDIX

A. Basic Information About the School

Name of School	St Alban's RC High School
School type	Foundation
Age-range of pupils	11-18
Address of school	The Park Pontypool Torfaen
Post-Code	NP4 6XG
Telephone Number	01495 765800

Headteacher	Mr Michael Coady
Date of appointment	1 September 2001
Chair of Governors	Mr Gregory Hinds
Registered Inspector	Miss Glynis Owen
Dates of inspection	30 September-4 October 2002

B. School Data and Indicators

<i>Number of pupils in each year group</i>								
Year group	Y7	Y8	Y9	Y10	Y11	Y12	Y13	Total
Number of pupils	159	143	158	125	129	143	115	972

<i>Total number of teachers</i>			
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time equivalent (fte)
Number of teachers	50	0.4	50.4

<i>Staffing information</i>	
Pupil:teacher (fte) ratio (excluding special classes)	19.27:1
Average teaching group size	19.2
Overall contact ratio	76.5 %

<i>Percentage attendance for three complete terms prior to the inspection</i>						
	Y7	Y8	Y9	Y10	Y11	Whole school
Term 1	93.5	93.3	91.6	93.4	89.4	92.47
Term 2	91.1	89.4	90.2	93.8	89.4	90.87
Term 3	92.5	93.3	90.0	92.0	93.0	92.1

<i>Number of pupils excluded during 12 months prior to inspection</i>	12 temp 2 perm
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C. Results of National Curriculum Assessments and Public Examinations

National Curriculum Assessment KS3 results: 2001														
Total number of pupils in Y9: 126														
Percentage of pupils at each level														
			D	A	F	W	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
EN	Teacher assessment	School	0	0.8	0.8	0	0.8	0	5.5	21.3	36.2	24.4	10.2	0
		National	0	1	1	0	0	3	10	22	34	21	8	0
	Test	School	0	2.4	0.8	0	0	0	8.7	22.8	39.4	20.5	5.5	0
		National	0	3	2	-	-	-	9	22	33	19	10	-
MA	Teacher assessment	School	0	0	3.1	0	0	0.8	8.7	11	22.8	38.4	15	0
		National	0	1	0	0	0	1	10	23	25	26	13	1
	Test	School	0	3.1	3.1	0	0	0	7.9	19.7	25.2	28.3	12.6	0
		National	0	6	1	-	-	-	8	22	22	27	13	-
SC	Teacher assessment	School	0	0	0.8	0	0	0	2.3	16.5	30.7	3.8	11.8	0
		National	0	1	1	0	0	1	10	24	31	23	9	0
	Test	School	0	3.9	0.8	0	0	0	7.1	15.7	30.7	32.3	9.5	0
		National	0	4	1	-	-	-	9	22	29	24	10	-

Percentage of pupils attaining at least level 5 in mathematics, science and either English or Welsh (first language)			
by Teacher Assessment		by Test	
In the school:	64.6	In the school:	61
In Wales:	51	In Wales:	50

D - Pupils excepted under statutory arrangements from part of the National Curriculum
 A - Pupils who have failed to register a level because of absence
 F - Pupils who have failed to register a level for reasons other than absence
 W - Pupils who are working towards level 1
 EP - Exceptional Performance, where pupils at Key Stage 3 perform above level 8.

For pupils aged 15, results in GCSE, CoE, GNVQ and NVQ			
Number of pupils aged 15 on the school roll in January 2001: 128			
The percentage of 15 year old pupils who in 2001:			
	School	UA	Wales
were entered for 5 or more GCSEs	93	87	86
achieved 5 or more GCSE grades A*-C	73	46	50
achieved 5 or more GCSE grades A*-G	93	86	85
achieved GCSE grades A*-C in each of mathematics, science, English or Welsh first language)	41	33	37
entered at least one CoE, GCSE short course or GCSE	100	97	96
achieved one or more GCSE grades A*-C	88	71	73
achieved one or more GCSE grades A*-G	100	94	92
achieved no graded GCSE	0	4	5
achieved one or more CoE only	0	2	3
achieved a GNVQ Part 1, a GNVQ at Foundation level or NVQ level 1	10		
achieved a GNVQ Part 1, a GNVQ at Intermediate level or NVQ level 2	34		
achieved at least 5 GCSE grades A* to C, the equivalent vocational qualifications or a combination of both	73		
achieved at least 5 GCSE grades A* to G, the equivalent vocational qualifications or a combination of both	93		

For pupils aged 16, 17 and 18, results in A/AS, GNVQs and NVQs			
Number of pupils aged 16, 17 and 18 in January 2001: 67			
Number of pupils entered for 2 or more GCE A level examinations or equivalent in 2001: 23			
Number of pupils entered for fewer than 2 GCE A levels or equivalent in 2001: 26			
	School	UA	Wales
Percentage of pupils entered who achieved 2 or more grades A-C	62	60	62
Percentage of pupils entered who achieved 2 or more grades A-E	88	92	93
Average points score per candidate	18	18	18
Number of pupils who achieved a GNVQ Intermediate or NVQ at level 2	0		
Number of pupils who achieved a GNVQ Advanced or NVQ at level 3	3		

D. The Evidence Base of the Inspection

- Seventeen inspectors spent the equivalent of 52 days at the school.
- 214 lessons were observed, including full and part sessions, covering all curricular areas.
- Inspectors attended a sample of assemblies, tutor periods and extra-curricular activities.
- Inspectors held discussions with the chairman and vice-chairman of governors, headteacher, members of SMT, heads of departments, members of the pastoral team, staff with whole-school responsibilities and support staff.
- Work across the curriculum, from representative pupils in Years 7-11, was examined. Pupils' and students' work in each subject was also scrutinised.
- There was formal discussion with pupils representing KS3, KS4 and the sixth form, and discussion with many pupils in and out of lessons.
- The Registered Inspector met the staff and governing body prior to the inspection.

- Twenty-two parents attended the parents’ meeting and 248 replies to the parents’ questionnaire were analysed.
- Comprehensive documentation provided by the school was scrutinised before and during the inspection.
- Feedback was given to departments and to the SMT during the week of the inspection, and to the SMT and governors after the inspection.

E. Composition and Responsibilities of the Inspection Team

Inspector	Type	Aspect Responsibilities	Subject Responsibilities
G Owen	RgI	Context; Main findings; Standards achieved in subjects and areas of learning; Teaching; Quality of self-evaluation and planning for improvement; leadership and efficiency; School improvement	modern foreign languages
R Pexton	Lay	Behaviour and attitudes; Attendance; Partnerships with parents and community, schools and other institutions; Partnership with industry	
J Gill	Core	Standards achieved in key skills across the curriculum; Curriculum	English
G Davies	Core	Pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development; Assessment, recording and reporting; Staffing, accommodation and learning resources	science
D Makin	Core	Support, guidance and pupils’ welfare	physical education, drama, media studies
E Price-Jones	Core		mathematics
J Loxton	Team		science
J Davies	Team		Welsh
J Down	Team	ICT across the curriculum	design technology, information technology
E Jones	Team		design technology, home economics, health and social care
A Kelly	Team		history, sociology, law
H Llewelyn	Team		geography, leisure and tourism
M Williams	Team		modern foreign languages
J Williams	Team		art
R Nicholls	Team		music
N Carr	Team		business education
A Norbury	Team	Provision for pupils with special education needs	

The visiting inspectors wish to thank the governors, the headteacher and all the staff for the co-operation and courtesy they received during the inspection.