

# St Mary's Catholic High School Inspection Report

Grade 1 to Grade 12

Report published May 2010

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## Explanation of the inspection levels used in the report

**Outstanding** – exceptionally high quality of performance or practice.

**Good** – the expected level of quality for every school in Dubai.

**Acceptable** – the minimum level of acceptability required for Dubai. All key aspects of performance and practice in every school should meet or exceed this level.

**Unsatisfactory** – quality not yet at the level acceptable for schools in Dubai. Schools will be expected to take urgent measures to improve the quality of any aspect of their performance or practice that is judged at this level.

St. Mary's Catholic High School was inspected in October 2009 as part the regular inspection of all schools in Dubai. The inspection covered key aspects of the work of the school at all stages. It evaluated students' achievements, the effectiveness of the school, the environment for learning, the school's processes for self evaluation and capacity for improvement. There was a particular focus on students' progress in Islamic Education (for Muslim students), Arabic, English, mathematics and science.

## Basic information about the school

Located in Oud Metha, St. Mary's Catholic High School is a private school providing education for students aged five to 18 years. The school follows an English curriculum. At the time of the inspection, there were 2350 students on roll. The student attendance reported by the school for the last academic session was outstanding. For administrative purposes, the school was organised into a junior school (Grades 1 to 4), middle school (Grades 5 to 8) and upper school (Grades 9 to 12), each with a separate co-ordinator.

Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau (DSIB) analysed responses to online questionnaires completed by parents and a sample group of parents were seen during the inspection. Parents were happy with the care and education of their children. The positive interaction between parents and staff was highly valued and almost all parents stressed their appreciation for the work of the staff who they judged to be very devoted. They particularly welcomed the schools emphasis on developing civic responsibility and awareness of the wider world through assemblies and lessons and welcomed the regular communications through the school website to keep them informed on news and developments. Although remaining overwhelmingly positive about the school a few parents expressed concerns about the relatively high turnover of staff and the impact this was having on their child's progress. The cost of transport for those who need to use it was thought to be too high and parents wanted more opportunities for senior boys to contribute to community service. A minority did not feel that the school always dealt effectively with any concerns they raised. They were confident that the school was safe and that their children were well looked after. Parents of children who required additional support with their learning were very positive about how the school helped their children.

## How well does the school perform overall?

St. Mary's Catholic High School provided an acceptable quality of education for its students with some good features. It had made a diligent start to addressing the recommendations detailed in the 2008 report. Most of the findings identified in that inspection were confirmed but, in the important area of teaching, learning and assessment, a more critical assessment was made. At IGCSE and GCE, students achieved impressive outcomes in their public examinations in nearly all their subjects. This reflected some very knowledgeable and focused teaching of the examination specifications and the positive learning ethos of students in Grades 10 to 12. Students demonstrated good personal social development. Most were keen to succeed and older students particularly showed very positive attitudes to learning. Generally, the relationship between staff and students was good. Behaviour in lessons and around the school was also good except in Grades 1 to 4. Students acquired civic understanding and a good appreciation of Islam. Students' economic and environmental understanding was good and they were aware of Dubai's increasing emphasis on community recycling and energy-saving.

Teaching, learning and assessment were acceptable overall but a wide variation was seen. The turnover of teaching staff was high and only a minority of teachers had been in the school for more than 2 years. This adversely impacted on the quality of teaching and learning. As many unsatisfactory lessons were seen as those that were good or of high quality. A disproportionately high proportion of the unsatisfactory teaching and learning was seen in Grades 1 to 4 and, although the teaching of IGCSE and GCE subjects was good, examples of unsatisfactory teaching was seen in all grades. The curriculum offered by the school was relatively narrow in terms of the range and types of courses offered but the first steps to review its appropriateness had been taken. The school provided good support for students and useful progress was being made in extending that support for students with special educational needs. While the school was a safe and secure place, better supervision of students in Grades 1 to 4 was needed.

Leadership and management of the school were acceptable. Outside of the junior grades, students studied in a friendly, orderly and purposeful environment. There was a clear vision of how the school wanted to develop and serve its students. Aspects most requiring improvement included the quality of teaching at Grades 1 to 4 and the need for the school to make its educational and curriculum goals clear. Governance was acceptable as were the schools staffing, facilities and resources.

## Key features of the school

- Outstanding examination outcomes in Grades 11 and 12;
- Good pastoral care and support for students;
- The good relationships between staff and students in the upper school;
- Very positive attitudes to learning among older students;
- Strong support and appreciation by parents for the work of the school.

## Recommendations

- Improve teaching, learning and assessment, particularly in Grades 1 to 4;
- Introduce a programme of continuous professional development for teachers which will ensure consistently good quality teaching and learning across all stages of the school;
- Give greater attention to succession planning at all levels in the school.

## How good are the students' attainment and progress in key subjects?

Attainment and progress in Islamic Education were good at the primary and secondary stages and outstanding at post-16. Most students knew basic facts about Islam, including the significance of prayer, and could give examples of how these affected their daily life. Most students knew the main facts of the Prophet Mohammed's (PBUH) life and demonstrated that they understood the sayings by the way they lived their lives. They could name and recall important facts about prophets. Students were able to perform prayer and could recite chapters from The Holy Qur'an according to the expectation for their age.

Attainment and progress in Arabic were acceptable. Most students could greet in Arabic but did not readily use words in other contexts unless reminded to do so. High-attaining younger Arab students responded thoughtfully to questioning and expressed themselves with clarity and imagination. Most non-Arab students spoke less fluently when they were expected to respond in sentences. Most students throughout the school could recognise letters and their order in words and could read familiar high frequency words in context. A few Arab students could write well independently. However, many non-Arab students did not form their letters properly and were not able to complete independent writing tasks effectively. Early years students did not write independently but only copied the teacher.

Attainment and progress in English was unsatisfactory in Grades 1 to 4 and good in Grades 5 to 11. Attainment and progress was particularly strong in Grades 10 and 11. All students were competent in their use of spoken language and their listening skills were good. Students came to school with some established reading skills and by the time they reached Grades 10 and 11, these were sufficiently developed to explore nuances in a range of challenging texts. In Grades 10 and 11, students were able to read for explicit and implicit meaning as well as for structure and style. In contrast, writing in Grades 1 to 4 was almost entirely teacher-directed and involved recording simple answers and copying from the board. Students' skills at the early stages were not well developed. In the higher grades, writing became more focused and the students developed competent note taking skills through a variety of genres; novels, recount text and the writing of CVs. Handwriting skills developed appropriately through the age ranges. Examination outcomes were excellent but English was not offered to Post-16 students.

In mathematics, attainment and progress in Grades 1 to 4 was unsatisfactory. Attainment and progress improved steadily thereafter and was good in the secondary years and in the sixth form. Junior school students struggled with addition and subtraction and many entered the secondary phase still lacking a sound understanding of number. In and beyond Grade 6, attainment and progress improved and most students displayed an ability to solve increasing demanding mathematical problems.

In the Grades 1 to 4, attainment and progress in science were acceptable, good in the middle grades and of high quality in Grades 10 to 12. In Grades 1 and 2, students understood about the senses and both boys and girls in Grade 2 showed a secure understanding of each of the science topics they had studied. By the end of Grade 4k students were able to plan simple experiments and, in Grades 5 and 6, most students understood which variables must be kept constant in more sophisticated experiments. Students in Grades 9 to 11 mastered the GCSE specifications with steadily increasing confidence. In the Sixth Form, in each of the three separate science subjects, students produced work of high quality evidenced by the excellent examination outcomes.

## How good is the students' personal and social development?

Students' attitudes and behaviour was good overall and was outstanding in Grades 10 to 12. Students were well behaved in class and played well together in the playground. Where there were instances of misbehaviour, mainly in Grades 1 to 3, this was due to ineffective classroom management or inadequate supervision, rather than students' attitudes. Students in Grade 4 were self-disciplined even when lessons lacked challenge. Students in Grades 5 to 9 worked hard and were keen to learn. There were well judged systems in place to promote good behaviour. Assemblies, and the recently introduced PSHE programme and Form Time lessons provided a suitable base from which to develop positive attitudes and behaviour. Students in Grades 10 to 12 were fully focused on their work and had positive attitudes towards each other. Students' attendance was outstanding and students were rarely late for lessons.

Most students had retained a good sense of their national identities within Dubai's multi-cultural society. They appreciated, and benefited from, local traditions, cultures and religions. Relationships were good between students, and between students and teachers. Most senior students could discuss the importance of Islam to people in Dubai.

Students' economic and environmental understanding was good and they were aware of Dubai's increasing emphasis on community recycling and power-saving. Senior students explained the local effects of the global economical crisis, and students in Grade 8 understood the growth and development of the UAE. Many students, motivated by local successes, aspired to careers in medicine, law, engineering and architecture. Students in all year groups were proud of their school. They cared for its buildings and resources, but often created litter through careless disposal of paper wrappings from their lunchboxes.

### How good are the teaching and learning?

Overall, teaching and learning were acceptable, although the difference between the most and least successful teaching was unacceptably wide. As many unsatisfactory lessons were seen as those that were of good quality. While most of the unsatisfactory teaching occurred in Grades 1 to 4, examples of unsatisfactory teaching were seen in each grade. Significant shortcomings in lesson plans and in the selection and use of resources restricted opportunities for learning in class. Teaching was unsatisfactory in Grades 1 to 4 and several teachers lacked effective classroom management skills. Most lessons were dominated by the teacher talking to the class for long periods. Students identified as having special educational needs were not supported effectively and the most able students were rarely challenged. There were insufficient opportunities for practical activities. Nearly all teachers were over-reliant on the use of text books and numerous opportunities were missed to extend students' learning through skilful questioning, or activities to encourage students to think for themselves. Teaching was acceptable in Grades 5 to 12. Teachers' subject knowledge was good, and the work was increasingly well matched to students' needs in Grades 9 to 12. In the most successful lessons teachers instilled in their students a spirit of enquiry, creating a positive climate for learning where students were encouraged to take risks and learn from their mistakes.

The quality of learning in Grades 1 to 4 was unsatisfactory. At the end of most lessons, students had learnt very little that was new to them and few had been able to share their knowledge and understanding with other students. On the rare occasions they were asked to make decisions and engage in the creative thinking, most showed they could do so. As they moved through the school, students learning improved steadily and, overall, it was acceptable in other grades. Most could confidently repeat familiar activities or procedures but had rather more difficulty in applying their learning to unfamiliar contexts. When given the chance, students successfully worked in pairs or groups. Across the school, students had few opportunities to improve their learning through the use of Information and Communications Technology.

Assessment was unsatisfactory in Grades 1 to 4 and acceptable in other grades. Teachers regularly marked exercise books with ticks but rarely added detailed comments to help students improve their work. End of unit tests and examinations provided staff and parents with some assessment information but this was not used effectively to improve their planning to meet individual students' needs. At the later stages, students were aware of their examination results and knew topics requiring further revision. However, they did not evaluate their own work rigorously. Systems for tracking students' progress were in the early stages of development and had little effect on student achievement.

## How well does the curriculum meet the educational needs of all students?

The school had made a useful start reviewing its curriculum in line with the recommendations made in the last report. There had been developments in the PHSE curriculum and the extra-curricular provision, for example. In Grades 1 to 4, the curriculum was unsatisfactory. It did not provide a sufficiently varied or stimulating range of learning opportunities. In Grades 5 to 9, while students studied an appropriate number of subjects, the selection of subject content was not well adapted to students' needs and interests. The curriculum was clearly defined for Grades 9 to 11 by the requirements of examination board specifications. In these grades it provided challenge as students approached their GCSE examinations. In the Sixth Form, the curriculum was narrow in range but engaged students well. In all years the curriculum was overly influenced by text books. Many of these failed to offer sufficient examples for learning relevant to the students' experiences. The school recognised that the range of subjects offered at GCE needed to be broadened and greater continuity and progression in learning should be planned as students move through the school. The review of the curriculum aimed to address these weaknesses. Extra-curricular activities had increased significantly since the last inspection and the response to many of these activities was good. Most provided opportunities for personal and social development but were not as closely linked to classroom activities as they could have been.

## How well does the school protect and support students?

There were very well developed systems in place to support students. The pastoral care team worked closely together and provided good support and guidance for students. Students had every confidence in their counsellors. Health advice was regularly given, often by the school nurse, and students with special educational needs were now being identified and supported acceptably.

Student-staff relationships were good especially among older students and both students and parents were kept well informed through detailed written advice and home-school diaries. However, students' progress was not closely tracked and career guidance was reactive and not sufficiently proactive. The keeping of academic records and career guidance was unsatisfactory. Form Time and the recently introduced Personal, Social and Health Programmes provided a sound base on which to plan students' personal development. Community Service

provided support for sixth form students and others requiring assistance. Students' attendance and punctuality were monitored well. The school was housed in suitable premises, although some of the classrooms for younger children were rather small, demanding greater organisational skills of teachers when providing suitable activities for younger students. The school was a safe place in which students worked and played.

## How good are the leadership and management of the school?

Leadership and management of the school was acceptable. The efficient organisation of school routines created a school which was friendly, orderly, and purposeful. Pastoral leadership was well judged enabling the school to deliver on its stated mission with integrity and compassion. Useful progress had been made in responding to the last inspection report and in devolving responsibility to heads of departments and coordinators. In Grades 5 to 9, the influence of coordinators led to some productive one to one working with teachers to improve practice. This was not yet the case in every grade nor in all subjects. Weaknesses in teaching and learning had not been effectively addressed.

The schools senior management had evaluated many of the main strengths and weaknesses accurately helped by the last inspection report. They understood the need for a far stronger focus on the continuous professional development of staff. They understood the need to reduce the high turnover of staff. They also recognised the need for better succession planning. Leadership in the classroom and laboratory by teachers of GCSE and A-level subjects was often of high quality and contributed greatly to the success of students. Their work contrasted markedly with that seen in Grades 1 to 4 where lines of responsibility were unclear and outcomes for students unsatisfactory.

The school was very well supported by parents who appreciated the caring and committed approach to the education and welfare of their children. Links with parents were good and most parents greatly appreciated them. They particularly welcomed the frequent reports and made good use of the information on the schools website. Those whose children required additional support with their learning were particularly positive about the school.

Governance was acceptable and provided helpful support to the school in developing its pastoral and community role but there was no-one identified to act as a 'critical friend' to the Principal or to help senior managers set targets and monitor the quality of teaching and learning. Better support was needed to develop much needed succession planning. A point noted in the last inspection report.

There were sufficient qualified teachers within the school. Whilst there was a satisfactory balance of expertise, there were too few members of staff who had a secure understanding of how students in the lower school learn. The premises and facilities provided a clean, safe environment for learning. Most classrooms were of an acceptable size although the youngest children were constrained in their learning by rooms which were too small. In Grades 1 to 4, resources for learning were insufficient to meet the learning needs of the students. Throughout the rest of the school, resources such as library books and audio visual equipment were acceptable. Science laboratories were well stocked and used by older students. ICT suites allowed all students to be taught ICT on a regular basis.

## Summary of inspection judgements

In their evaluation of the overall effectiveness of the school, the inspection team made judgements about the following aspects of the school's performance.

Four descriptors are: Outstanding; Good; Acceptable; Unsatisfactory.

How good is the students' attainment and progress in Islamic Education?			
Age group:	Primary	Secondary	Post-16
Attainment	Good	Good	Outstanding
Progress over time	Good	Good	Outstanding

How good is the students' attainment and progress in Arabic?			
Age group:	Primary	Secondary	Post-16
Attainment	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Progress over time	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable

How good is the students' attainment and progress in English?			
Age group:	Primary	Secondary	Post-16
Attainment	Unsatisfactory	Good	Not Applicable
Progress over time	Unsatisfactory	Good	Not Applicable

How good is the students' attainment and progress in mathematics?			
Age group:	Primary	Secondary	Post-16
Attainment	Unsatisfactory	Good	Good
Progress over time	Unsatisfactory	Good	Good

How good is the students' attainment and progress in science?			
Age group:	Primary	Secondary	Post-16
Attainment	Acceptable	Good	Outstanding
Progress over time	Acceptable	Good	Outstanding

How good is the students' personal and social development?			
Age group:	Primary	Secondary	Post-16
Attitudes and behaviour	Acceptable	Good	Outstanding
Islamic, cultural and civic understanding	Good	Good	Good
Economic and environmental understanding	Good	Good	Good

How good are teaching and learning?			
Age group:	Primary	Secondary	Post-16
Teaching for effective learning	Unsatisfactory	Acceptable	Good
Quality of students' learning	Unsatisfactory	Acceptable	Good
Assessment	Unsatisfactory	Acceptable	Acceptable

How well does the curriculum meet the educational needs of all students?			
Age group:	Primary	Secondary	Post-16
Curriculum quality	Unsatisfactory	Acceptable	Acceptable

How well does the school protect and support students?			
Age group:	Primary	Secondary	Post-16
Health and safety	Acceptable	Good	Good
Quality of support	Good	Good	Good

How good are the leadership and management of the school?	
Quality of leadership	Acceptable
Self-evaluation and improvement planning	Acceptable
Partnerships with parents and the community	Good
Governance	Acceptable
Staffing, facilities and resources	Acceptable

How well does the school perform overall?
Acceptable

## Next Steps

The school has been asked to prepare an action plan indicating how it will address the main findings of the report, and to share that plan with parents. The next inspection will report on the progress made by the school.

Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau  
Knowledge and Human Development Authority

## How to contact us

If you have a concern or wish to comment on any aspect of this report you should contact: [inspection@khda.gov.ae](mailto:inspection@khda.gov.ae).

More information about Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau can be found at [www.khda.gov.ae](http://www.khda.gov.ae).

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