

St Mary`s School

Inspection report for Boarding School

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Inspector	Sharon Lewis
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Date of last inspection	11/03/2008

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good: this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The Institute of The Blessed Virgin Mary founded St Mary's School in 1898. Today, St Mary's operates as a Catholic day and boarding school for girls aged 4 to 18 years of age. Students of all faiths are accepted. The ethos of boarding is one of general spiritual values, where boarders are encouraged to develop caring and responsible attitudes towards their fellow boarders. The school currently cares for 86 boarders. The school specialises in offering full-time boarding to students, who are predominately from overseas. Weekly and flexi boarding is also available.

St Mary's is situated in the heart of Cambridge with easy access to shopping, sporting and leisure facilities.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Excellence permeates throughout this boarding inspection. The school's boarding practice is exceptional. Boarders receive individualised care and support which meets their holistic needs. Care embraces the ethos of the school with a strong commitment to being in loco parentis. There is passionate, dynamic leadership which is reflective and focused on promoting excellence. Senior leadership, governors teaching and ancillary staff continually strive for further improvement through evaluative practice.

Boarders benefit from excellent outcomes in all areas. There is a genuine respect for the uniqueness of each girl, nurturing their talents and supporting them to achieve in all areas of their lives, not just academically. Girls are happy, courteous, confident and enjoy boarding. Excellence, passion and enthusiasm extends throughout all areas of school. Staff work exceptionally well to promote the well-being of boarders. The only recommendation relates to the need to raise the awareness of the independent listener role. This does not have a significant impact on boarders, as they have a great range of support available to them.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection the school was asked to address four recommendations. These related to the laundry provision, shower rooms, medication records and staff recruitment. The school has successfully addressed all recommendations. Boarders benefit from improved laundry arrangements. This includes good onsite facilities. Boarders have great privacy. Shower rooms have been refurbished and are now situated in private areas within the main boarding house. Boarders are protected by a more robust medication administration system. Records now detail the reason for

administering non-prescribed medication. The improved recruitment arrangements effectively safeguard boarders.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Boarders benefit from outstanding health arrangements. The school's personal, social, health and economic education is excellent. Boarders receive extensive age-appropriate guidance. The fully integrated approach concentrates on promoting the physical and emotional well-being of boarders. Boarders have ample opportunity to exercise. A notable benefit is the sixth formers' membership of a private gym. Extra-curricular activities incorporate yoga, various forms of dance and a range of sports. Boarders have access to counsellors and chaplaincy services. There are no issues with mental health. The multi-disciplinary care enables boarders to develop high levels of self-esteem. This is in line with the school's aims.

Boarders have access to high quality medical treatment and first aid. Boarders benefit from a new medical centre which includes a comfortable sick bay. Registered nurses are available for the treatment of minor illnesses. All boarding staff and numerous school staff are qualified first aiders. Life saving equipment is located on the school premises. Boarders have access to an onsite doctor surgery every week. They can also visit the local surgery, as they wish. School staff have access to a range of training and health related resources. This enables them to effectively respond to the wide range of health needs. Examples are diabetes and allergies.

The school has a highly developed medication policy and procedure. This specifically addresses the international student base and the use of non-prescribed medication. Staff receive training in the administration of medication and this training is regularly updated. Boarders over the age of 16 are able to self medicate, after a rigorous risk assessment process. Staff securely store all medication. Computerised health records provide a very efficient system for monitoring health matters.

Boarders enjoy high quality catering provision. The refurbished dining hall and the self service cafeteria promotes a relaxed and sociable atmosphere. Furnishings, cutlery and crockery are of a high standard. Boarders benefit from ample amounts of nutritious foods from a wide range of cultures. Caterers are able to meet specific dietary needs, This includes vegetarian options and catering for religious needs, an example being a halal diet. Special theme nights showcase dishes from particular countries and celebrate international occasions, an example being the Chinese New Year. There is a very good understanding of the needs of boarders. This takes into account their international heritage, their daily routines and their need to develop independent living skills.

Mealtimes flexibly take into account boarders' needs. A good example of this is the introduction of the boarders' brunch, which provides a welcomed alternative arrangement on Saturdays. Boarders have their own well stocked kitchens, within their boarding houses. Boarders also have opportunities to develop their cookery

skills. There is an excellent system which enables boarders to influence menu planning. The school actively promotes healthy eating. Water machines are located throughout the premises. Fresh fruit is widely available. Boarders can also enjoy healthy snacks from vending machines. The school provides an excellent degree of choice. Boarders are able to enjoy their own take away meal on specific days. They also have the opportunity of eating out.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Boarders receive protection from the school's excellent safeguarding practices. The school has very well- developed guidance on safeguarding and promoting the welfare of all pupils. Boarders confirm that they 'feel safe' and there is a no bullying within the school. There is a very good understanding of the need to protect boarders in the digital age. An impressive array of procedures address these issues. This includes cyber bullying and protection online, especially whilst using social networking sites. Outstanding procedures are also sent to parents to highlight pertinent personal safety issues.

The school has a very clear procedure for responding to child protection concerns. There is an excellent designated person's arrangement. This includes the training of key staff, which ensures a person is always available to respond to allegations. The school has very good links with the local safeguarding children board. This additionally extends to specialist peer support with other independent schools. The excellent child protection training ensures all new staff receive training and existing staff receive annual refresher training. Older pupils in leadership roles also receive relevant training. Throughout the school are the contact details for internal and external persons who the boarders can approach with their safeguarding concerns.

Boarders' behaviour is exemplary. Boarders benefit from a very comprehensive achievement and reward policy. This assists with identifying and nurturing individual gifts and interests. The school's behavioural management ethos focuses on affirmation, reinforcement and reasoning, rather than sanctions. The policies on behaviour, discipline, punishments, rewards and restraint are very clear. The use of sanctions is extremely rare. The management of behaviour is based on promoting excellence. Boarders enjoy participating in the house point system and receiving certificates for personal achievements.

Boarders reside within a very safe and secure living environment. Intruder alarms, code locks on doors, close circuit television and night visibility checks contribute to the excellent security arrangements. The school seriously addresses fire safety. Improvements include the upgrading of the fire system. Staff and boarders demonstrated a high awareness of the fire safety precautions. There are regular fire drills and checking of fire safety and electrical equipment. Thorough risk assessments address all aspects of safety of the premises and grounds and boarders' behaviour and activities. The school takes great effort to ensure that all areas used by boarders are free from avoidable safety hazards.

Boarders receive outstanding protection from the school's safe recruitment process. Staff recruitment and checks on other adults are comprehensive and thorough exceeding the standards and requirements. The school maintains very detailed records of the selection process undertaken. The school is highly selective, the aim being to find the best person for the job, rather than merely filling a vacancy.

Staff show a very high regard for the privacy of the boarders. Staff knock on bedroom doors before entering. The school has a very clear policy, that ensures any adults who have access to boarders and accommodation, are kept under staff supervision. There is a rigorous checking process for all staff who work unsupervised with boarders. This process includes obtaining satisfactory criminal record bureau clearance for sessional staff and taxi drivers.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Boarders receive an excellent range of support and opportunities that encourages them to achieve both educationally and socially. There is a strong commitment to enabling each girl to fulfil her potential. The school provides an exceptional approach to encouraging self worth and each individual's talents. The wide variety of extra curricular activities focuses on in-house enrichment. Girls can pursue their interests and talents an afternoon each week, alongside lunch times and after school activities. Boarders greatly benefit from engaging in sport, recreational activities and hobbies that are new to them. An example of the school's outstanding success is their external validation regarding the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. This notable scheme enables girls to learn leadership, team work and self-reliance.

The school provides boarders with an exceptionally strong integrated support system. All boarding staff offer pastoral and academic assistance in a range of subjects. Time is always spent with individuals when they seem distressed. Heads of Year and the Head of Boarding work together to keep each other informed when challenging situations arise. Boarders state they can discuss issues with the boarding staff, headmistress, visiting tutors, gap students and numerous staff within the school. Boarders benefit from focused support regarding attainment, future plans, work placements and university choices. The flexibility outside core subjects assists with developing strengths.

Staff concern for boarders extends beyond their daily roles. An example of this being some teachers acting as guardians for a small number of boarders. Boarders are able to discuss their concerns with non teaching staff, examples are the nurses, a counsellor and the chaplain. The school has an independent listener so that pupils can turn to someone who is not employed by the school. The wide range of support means that boarders have not had to use this service. They were, therefore, unaware of this person.

The caring atmosphere promotes a strong sense of responsibility towards others.

Boarders organise and participate in their annual charity concert. They additionally engage in a range of other charitable pursuits. The school encourages tolerance, understanding, spirituality and service. Girls have excellent opportunities to develop their leadership skills and campaign for a variety of causes. Boarders receive peer support through the head boarder, prefect and mentoring schemes. Boarders state one of the things they love about the school is their strong friendships. Older girls provide exceptional support to younger students.

The school welcomes and celebrates the diversity of its boarders. The majority of boarders are from overseas. The strong commitment to equal opportunities ensures there is no inappropriate discrimination on grounds of disability, race, religion, cultural background, linguistic background, academic or sporting ability. The school's ecumenical approach to spirituality respects and affirms different religious beliefs. This includes celebrating international festivals. Boarders are able to share their cultures and traditions in a variety of arenas. Examples in school assemblies and extra curricular clubs.

The school excels in their special educational needs and English as an additional language support. These departments assist with elevating outcomes for boarders. The virtual learning suite is an innovative resource to assist girls with developing their English skills. The school has an international community co-ordinator. This person has an important role establishing links with inter faith groups and regularly attending discussions on cultural and faith issues. They also lead on staff training in this area, which ensures there is a sound understanding of boarders' needs.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The school exceeds standards in this outcome area. Girls have a key role in influencing the day to day running of the boarding provision and wider school issues. Boarders participate in weekly meetings within their houses. The school undertakes a range of surveys which focus on continuous improvement. An example being the food surveys, which contribute towards menu plans. The school is solution-focused and boarders also raise share their views informally using suggestion boxes. The Head of Boarding and other senior staff additionally have an open door policy. Boarders also feel free to approach the headmistress.

The school maintains positive relationships between themselves and boarders' families. The Head of Boarding regularly sends parents newsletter updates on boarding life. There is a very good understanding of the need for private parental contact. There is wide ranging internet access, which is being continually upgraded to provide greater bandwidth. This enables boarders to keep in touch via email or visual software programs. Boarders are also able to use their mobile phones and card or payphones.

The school provides boarders with access to appropriate information about the outside world, through newspapers, the internet, the television or radio. The school

is currently piloting a virtual learning environment. This has the potential to be an extremely powerful part of the school community communication system. It will be accessible externally anywhere in the world, via internet, providing a great variety of resources for staff, pupils, parents, alumnae and friends of St Mary's.

New boarders receive an excellent introduction to the school. The comprehensive induction sensitively considers boarders' needs and results in them feeling well informed and warmly welcomed. The buddying system and sharing of rooms promote integration and inter racial friendships. A great initiative is the contact between established and new boarders during the summer holidays. Consultation also commences prior to the girls joining the school. The headmistress proactively uses a visual computer program to interview prospective boarders.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Boarders benefit from the school's proactive approach to addressing their accommodation needs. Since the last inspection the school has bought further properties specifically for boarding. The onsite maintenance team creatively contribute to the improved living arrangements. The extensive modernisation and refurbishment programme ensures boarders enjoy a high standard of accommodation.

Bateman House provides excellent accommodation for the majority of sixth formers. This provision encourages a greater degree of independence. Other sixth formers live within the top floor of the main school. This area is self contained. All boarding houses provide cosy lounges, modern kitchens and laundry rooms. The younger boarders also live in the main house. Their accommodation the Elms (Main School House), offers spacious shared rooms.

Boarding accommodation is comfortable, well lit and ventilated. The additional roof insulation provides a warm living environment. There is a very high standard of maintenance and cleanliness. Individual rooms reflect the interests and taste of the boarders who sleep there. New beds, mattresses, furnishings and redecoration contribute to the pleasant surroundings. Being in the heart of a university city boarders have access to a rich cultural, intellectual and social life. The scenic views from the boarding houses showcase the city skyline and the botanical gardens.

The toilet and washing provision meets the standards and ensures that boarders have privacy when they use them. Boarders' rooms have washbasins and where possible mixer taps. Boarders benefit from the renovated bathrooms. The upgrading of the water system ensures there is better shower pressure.

Boarders can access a range of onsite facilities. Sixth formers have their own study centre this includes a common room, kitchen and a computer suite. Boarders are able to use the library, the gym, outdoor areas and the art, music and textile rooms, along with the new cookery suite and photographic dark rooms.

There is a very good system for ensuring that boarders' money and possessions are kept safe. Each boarder has a lockable space and a safe in their room. There is a very effective system for recording pocket money held on behalf of boarders. The school encourages boarders to save and the branch director from a local bank visits the school to help boarders open bank accounts.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

Boarders benefit from a very effective and coordinated management team, which is committed to excellence. The school prides itself on its academic standards, extra curricular provision and pastoral care. Boarders receive individualised care which reflects their holistic needs exceptionally well. The dedicated staff team demonstrate a strong commitment to their in loco parentis role. The school carefully considers the welfare of boarders and this is communicated clearly to all staff. There is a continual striving for further improvement through evaluative and reflective practice. The very supportive governing body equally understands and is committed to promoting the needs of boarders.

The school has passionate, dynamically effective leadership. The style of management ensures that staff are clear about their task and responsibilities and that boarders feel that the school is run with their welfare as its primary concern. The management of the boarding provision has a high profile in the school, with very clear lines of communication and accountability. The school has very well prepared contingency plans to address any crises that relate to the welfare of the boarders. The well developed system of risk assessment, is based on a concern for the welfare of boarders.

Boarders receive care from a staff team who can meet their individual and collective needs. There are excellent communication mechanisms between school and boarding. The staff team emanate a family environment which extends to teaching, boarding and ancillary staff. The school provides a very clear and detailed statement of boarding principles and practice to parents, boarders and staff. The very comprehensive website provides a wealth of information. Boarders comment that this was a valuable resource in determining whether the school was right for them. The restructuring of boarding provides a seamless service focused on the girls' well-being. The organisation of boarding houses ensures all houses operate to the same high standard.

New boarding staff receive a thorough induction training and have very clear job descriptions. Boarding staff receive regular training to equip them for their role. There is a well-established staff support system which includes individual and team meetings. Boarding staff have a copy of written guidance on boarding policies and practice. Available policies incorporates government guidance and the national

minimum standards. An outstanding example is the Every Boarder Matters document which focuses on the Every Child Matters outcome areas.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The school's ethos focuses on valuing and nurturing the unique qualities of each girl. The school celebrates the wide range of diverse backgrounds represented amongst the boarding community. There is a strong emphasis on cultural enrichment. Boarders enjoy international menus, good cultural representation on committees and in leadership positions. The school has an excellent respect for other faiths. Core values highlight a respect for humanity. The school effectively cares for boarders of different or no faith. Islamic boarders are effectively supported to observe their traditions. Staff actively support boarders in relation to their spirituality. Examples are vetting local churches. The school promotes excellent practice in regards to disability, special education needs and girls who have English as an additional language. Girls thrive within this caring and stimulating environment.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Compliance with national minimum standards

The school meets all the national minimum standards, with the exception of any listed below. To ensure that the school meets the national minimum standards the school needs to...

- ensure boarders are aware of the person the school has designated for them to contact outside the school staff, and know how they may be contacted. (NMS 14.6)