

Catholic Diocese of Northampton



## **INSPECTION REPORT OF DENOMINATIONAL CHARACTER AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

(Under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005)

### **THORNTON COLLEGE**

DfES School No: 825/6010

Head Teacher: Mrs Jo Storey  
Chair of Governors: Sr Helen Mary Haigh RJM

Reporting Inspectors: Mrs Margaret and Mr John Shinkwin,

**Date of Inspection: 28 February – 1 March 2017**

The School is in the Trusteeship of the Sisters of Jesus and Mary  
in partnership with the Catholic Diocese of Northampton

## **Description of School**

Thornton College is an independent school for girls aged 4 to 17(18 from September 2017) which is part of the worldwide mission of the Jesus and Mary sisters. The number of pupils on roll has risen from 373 when the school was last inspected in 2011 to 415 including 21 in Year 12, the first cohort of a newly created sixth form, for whom an attractive new area has been designed. 21% of the pupils are baptised Catholics. The school also has a nursery attended by 25 girls and 6 boys aged 2½ to 4. There are 138 girls in the junior school and 246 in the senior school. Approximately 60 girls are boarders, some of whom weekly board, which enables the school to welcome pupils from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. 63 pupils avail of the school's specialist learning support and 17 have English as an additional language. Overall the ability profile of the school is above the national average.

The college is in the trusteeship of the Congregation of Jesus and Mary and the sisters are a welcome presence in the school. Six are trustees and four sit on the governing body. The school is situated between Milton Keynes and Buckingham on a beautiful rural site which adds greatly to the educational experience of the pupils. The school's facilities provide very well for their needs.

## **Key grades for inspection**

1: Outstanding    2: Good    3: Requires improvement    4: Unsatisfactory

## **Overall effectiveness of this Catholic school**

**Grade 1**

Thornton College is an outstanding Catholic school. The pace of development has been accelerated under its new head, including the introduction of a sixth form in September 2016. Standards are consistently high and the girls blossom personally and academically within this warm and caring community. Relationships are characterised by love and respect and the girls' behaviour is excellent, in response to the school's provision for prayer, worship and religious education. Teaching is highly effective and assessment is thorough. Religious Education performs a key role in the personal and spiritual formation of the pupils which is enhanced by the Ethos and Chaplaincy Teams. The curriculum is well planned but the time allocated to RE in KS3 is inadequate. Spiritual, moral, social and health education promotes the personal development of the girls. The head is an energetic and dedicated leader who is inspired by the charisma of the Jesus and Mary order; she is ably supported by her trustees and governors, leadership team, head of RE, Chaplaincy co-ordinator and the staff. Parents are full of praise for the school, evident in the number of questionnaire returns (112), the overwhelming majority of which were positive.

## **The school's capacity for sustained improvement**

**Grade 1**

There is a determination in the school to be the best it can be coupled with a widespread belief in the school's success. Talented new teachers have been appointed complementing the existing experienced structure. Staff are encouraged to develop professionally and the head welcomes colleagues who come to share ideas. Recommendations from the previous inspection have been embraced. The issues identified for development in the last report have been fully addressed. A regular cycle of cross-curricular peer lesson observation has been established; more opportunities for teachers to observe best practice, both at Thornton and elsewhere, would further improve their learning. Scope to individualise learning, including more independent learning has been introduced and this has become part of the culture of the school culminating in the introduction of the Extended Project Qualification in the sixth form. Effective systems to track pupil progress have been developed, ISAMS in the senior school and Dashboard in the prep school.

The change in timetable to shorter lessons has focused the planning of lessons and parents remarked that "the teaching is sharper, seems to have more of an edge to it". It is, however, resulting in more teacher-led learning. An advertisement has already been placed to appoint an additional RE teacher which should help to address the shortfall in the curriculum time

allocated to RE. The teaching is strong and it is well supported by RE activities such as retreats, when the normal timetable is suspended. There has been a large investment in ICT but little use was made of it in the senior school over the two days of the inspection whereas ICT is an intrinsic part of RE teaching in the prep school. The head and the staff have a very clear understanding of the distinctive Jesus and Mary ethos of the school and are strongly committed to it. The school places a heavy emphasis on induction and continuing staff development. School self-evaluation is well grounded in a thorough analysis of data.

### **What the school should do to improve further:**

- Address the shortfall of curriculum time for religious education
- Provide further opportunities for the development of higher thinking skills giving a higher level of challenge in classes
- Offer further opportunities for pupils to take risks, to experience failure and to develop resilience.
- In a period of swift, simultaneous and deeply significant changes, both internal and external, to be mindful of the need for continuous and meaningful pastoral care of staff.

### **Outcomes for pupils**

#### **Grade 1**

Pupils' contribution to and benefit from the Catholic life of the school are outstanding. There is a depth of understanding of Mission Statement throughout the school and it is confidently articulated by the girls. They lead and participate in assemblies, compose prayers, read, serve and play instruments at Mass and other liturgies, both in the senior and prep schools. Year 12 is already taking responsibility for the organisation of liturgies; the girls are grateful for the prayerful support of staff and value the power of prayer in their own lives. The pupils from their earliest years are highly motivated to serve God and others. A Jesus and Mary sister from Aleppo, part of the order's world-wide community, made a deep impression in a talk about her experiences. St Claudine's feast-day has become a designated day of service involving every member of the school in activities such as visiting children's homes, inviting older people to the school, helping the homeless, working for CAFOD, and culminating in Mass.

The liturgical life of the school gives opportunities for prayer, reflection and collective worship; for example, the Shrove Tuesday assembly and Ash Wednesday service were well pitched and meaningful to the lives of the girls in both the prep and senior schools. Pupils pray regularly in class and form time; this can be either spontaneous or set prayers which are readily available. There are attractive displays in classrooms and corridors following the liturgical year and topics are taught in a way which stimulates reflection. The community is characterised by a vibrant, living and inclusive faith which embraces everyone. As one parent, a representative of many, writes "Whilst the school is undoubtedly Catholic, it is welcoming to all those of faith and those who do not have a faith, thus embracing all in a Christ-like fashion"

The pupils speak warmly of the Ethos Team and Chaplaincy, which make a powerful contribution to the spiritual life and well-being of the school community. The pastoral care of pupils is superb – there is a real love of the students, coupled with a highly professional approach to their care, and they thrive as a result. A parent commented, "It is an incredibly caring, supportive and encouraging staff who provide a calm, warm environment for girls to grow and mature into confident, strong young women who have the skills required to be a valuable part of society."

Pupils make very good progress and standards are consistent throughout the school with an impressively high proportion exceeding expectations based on the standardised tests. Pupils take a pride in their work and presentation is usually exemplary. Written work is regularly marked following the school policy and there are comments indicating how a pupil can improve. Prep and pre-prep pupils can explain the meaning of Ash Wednesday and the

purpose of Lent. Y5 girls displayed good knowledge and understanding of the Mass; they discuss readily in groups and listen attentively to each other. Work is differentiated to maximise pupils' learning. A Y4 lesson on Jesus' temptations in the desert illustrated this most satisfactorily. Pupils actively engage in lessons, collaborate well, demonstrate very positive attitudes and an enthusiasm for learning.

The GCSE RE results are outstanding, with average value added achievement of +1.5 grades across all subjects and in excess of this in RE. The school has a policy of entering all pupils for GCSE RE and there is usually a 100% A\*-C pass rate; 61% of the entries gained an A\* or A grades last summer. Sixth form RE provokes thought, discussion and debate on various aspects of relationship, including the students' relationship with God. The lesson, which at present is scheduled at the end of a long day will be timetabled next year at a time more conducive to learning. The girls have also participated in a workshop on marriage, the Young Leaders programme, the Salt and Light project and are enthused by Horizons, the social and moral development course, through which the Extended Project Qualification is delivered.

### **Leaders and Managers**

### **Grade 1**

The head provides dynamic leadership and lives out the Jesus and Mary Congregation's charism and contribution to the mission of the church. Whilst her leadership strongly promotes the Catholic life of the school, recent changes to the school day to eight 35 minute periods meant that the proportion of curriculum time at KS3 dropped well below the 10% required by the bishops of England and Wales. The school is endeavouring to correct this for the new academic year through a modification of time allocated to religious education and through seeking to appoint an additional subject specialist to the RE department.

The head of RE is passionate about her subject and engenders great enthusiasm in her pupils; she has a strong personal faith and great gift for connecting with the girls. The outward-looking approach seeks to build links with other faiths as can be seen by the study of Hinduism, Judaism and Islam in KS3. There is an on-going evaluation of the religious life of the school. In the prep school, this is evident in the preparation, challenge, enthusiasm and professionalism of teachers. There are clear systems for seeking the views of parents and pupils and mechanisms for acting on these. Religious Education is well resourced and the allocated budget compares favourably with other core subjects.

The governing body consists of a combination of members of Jesus and Mary sisters and lay people bringing a diverse range of skills and experience. They have a thorough knowledge of the school, providing effective challenge although they too overlooked the decrease in curriculum time when the shape of the school week changed. They fulfil their statutory and canonical responsibilities. They are kept well informed through regular reports from the head and are eager that their efforts to support the school should be recognised, accepted and valued. The development of the sixth form and the creation of the new area illustrate their forward-looking approach. The sisters live and work in school, talking to staff and girls on a daily basis and are a constant witness of service for the girls. They are responsive to views of pupils and parents and use their opinions to inform strategic priorities for the future.

Thornton College is a welcoming inclusive community whose boarders give the school an international flavour and friendships form naturally across cultures and faiths. The boarding community is developing strong links with the parish in Towcester and the school continues to host a Year 6 day of reflection for the local Catholic primary schools. The girls have a diverse range of faiths which are celebrated and contribute to the learning, enhanced by a varied programme of visits including Hindu mandir in Neasden, a synagogue and Jewish museum, a mosque, Coventry Cathedral and trips to Poland, including Auschwitz, and to Rome.

## **Provision**

## **Grade 1**

Provision for collective worship is outstanding. There is a well planned programme which engages and involves pupils, inspiring a deep, reflective response. Prayer is central to the life of the school and daily prayer takes a variety of forms both formal and informal. In the words of a parent "The school emphasises Christian gospel values both explicitly in prayer and in its actions and encourages children to do the same"

The calibre of teaching in RE is high. Teachers have a secure subject knowledge, in both the senior and prep schools and are confident in their explanations and answers. During the inspection, the Philosophy and Ethics Club was attended by 17 girls from Year 7-12; evidence of higher order thinking was marked. In the lessons observed, pupils were encouraged to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding through skilful teacher questioning but there was less emphasis on higher levels of thinking skills. The shorter 35 min periods do not always allow for a satisfactory conclusion to the lesson. The department has very good ICT resources but in the senior school these were under-utilised in the snapshot of lessons observed in the inspection due to the nature of the objectives of the lessons.

The religious education curriculum very effectively meets pupils' needs and engages their interest. There is concern however that the new GCSE specification being followed by Year 10 is less relevant to the girls than the out-going course followed by Year 11. In the prep school the "Here I Am" programme is followed. At KS3, the school has developed a well-constructed programme incorporating a varied range of learning experiences which are enhanced by the school's beautiful setting; the surrounding grounds and chapel are used frequently as a back drop for meaningful liturgical celebrations and reflections. There is a carefully constructed sex and relationships education programme which is being continually reviewed to reflect the changes in society.

Assessment is thorough. Both the senior and junior schools have sophisticated nationally benchmarked systems for tracking of pupils' progress and fortnightly staff meetings, led by heads of year (newly created posts) ensure that problems are identified and acted upon quickly. The class sizes enable teachers to know the girls well and there is good communication between them about their learning. Marking is affirming, helpful and targeted. The girls spoke very warmly of the support they receive.

Thornton is a very fine school and is a community where the girls flourish academically and personally, giving them an inner confidence and self-knowledge which enable them to meet future challenges with assurance and a generosity of spirit. "Thornton turns out wonderful women who go on to hold their own in any walk of life. It treats the girls as individuals and yet it feels like one huge family...a Catholic school which promotes strong Christian values."