



ISI Independent
Schools
Inspectorate

Focused Compliance and Educational Quality Inspection Report

St Columba's College

May 2022

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School's Details

College	St Columba's College			
DfE number	919/6136			
Registered charity number	1088480			
Address	St Columba's College King Harry Lane St Albans Hertfordshire AL3 4AW			
Telephone number	01727 855185			
Email address	collegeadmin@stcolumbascollege.org			
Headmaster	Mr David Buxton			
Chair of governors	Mr Kevin McGovern			
Age range	4 to 18			
Number of pupils on roll	759			
	EYFS	21	Juniors	179
	Seniors	427	Sixth Form	132
Inspection dates	10 to 13 May 2022			

1. Background Information

About the school

- 1.1 St Columba's College is a Roman Catholic day school located in St Albans, Hertfordshire founded in 1939. The school comprises a prep school, including an Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) setting for pupils aged between four and eleven years and a senior school for pupils aged eleven to eighteen years. The school is an incorporated charity, and the governors are approved by the Provincial Councillors of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart Province of the USA, England and the Philippines. Three of the Brothers continue to play an active role in school life.
- 1.2 The school started to admit female pupils in Reception, Year 1, Year 2 and Year 12 in 2021.
- 1.3 The inspection took into account the circumstances faced by schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed by government guidance at various points of the pandemic.

What the school seeks to do

- 1.4 The school aims to provide a Christian education and promote an environment of academic endeavour and personal discipline, in which young people are nurtured to develop their own best standard within the Columban virtues of courage, courtesy and compassion.

About the pupils

- 1.5 Pupils come from the Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and north London area, and represent a range of background and ethnicity. Data supplied by the school indicate that the ability of senior and preparatory school pupils is above average, compared to those taking the same tests nationally. The school has identified 191 pupils with special education needs and/or disabilities (SEND), of whom 176 receive additional support for specific learning difficulties or physical and emotional needs. No pupils in the school have an education, health and care (EHC) plan. Twenty-five pupils have English as an additional language (EAL), all of whom are supported by their class teachers. The school caters for pupils identified as being more able through its scholars and stretch and challenge programmes and additional activities.

2. Regulatory Compliance Inspection

Preface

The Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) is approved by the Secretary of State to inspect schools which are, or whose heads are, in membership of the associations which form the Independent Schools Council (ISC) and report on the extent to which they meet the Independent School Standards ('the standards') in the Schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014. Inspections of schools with early years settings not requiring registration also report whether the school complies with key provisions of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework. Additionally, inspections report on the school's accessibility plan under Schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010 and the ban on corporal punishment under section 548 of the Education Act 1996. Inspections also comment on the progress made to meet any compliance action points set out in the school's most recent statutory inspection.

ISI inspections are also carried out under the arrangements of the ISC Associations for the maintenance and improvement of the quality of their membership.

This is a FOCUSED COMPLIANCE INSPECTION which was combined with an inspection of EDUCATIONAL QUALITY. The FOCUSED COMPLIANCE inspection reports only on the school's compliance with the standards. The standards represent minimum requirements and judgements are given either as **met** or as **not met**. All schools are required to meet all the standards applicable to them. Where the minimum requirements are not met, this is clearly indicated in the relevant section of the report and the school is required to take the actions specified. In this focused compliance inspection, key standards have been inspected in detail. These are the standards on safeguarding; measures to guard against bullying; arrangements for pupils' health and safety; arrangements to check the suitability of staff; the provision of information; the handling of parents' complaints; and other related aspects of leadership and management. The remaining standards and requirements are deemed to continue to be met unless evidence to the contrary has been found.

Inspections do not include matters that are outside of the regulatory framework described above, such as: an exhaustive health and safety audit; compliance with data protection requirements; an in-depth examination of the structural condition of the school, its services or other physical features; contractual arrangements with parents; an investigation of the financial viability of the school or its accounting procedures.

Inspectors may be aware of individual safeguarding concerns, allegations and complaints as part of the inspection process. Such matters will not usually be referred to specifically in published reports in this document but will have been considered by the team in reaching its judgements.

Links to the standards and requirements can be found here: [The Education \(Independent School Standards\) Regulations 2014](#), [Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework](#).

Key findings

- 2.1 The school meets the standards in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014, and relevant requirements of the statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, and associated requirements, and no further action is required as a result of this inspection.**

PART 1 – Quality of education provided

- 2.2 In the prep school, the school's own framework for assessment confirms that teaching enables pupils to make good progress in the context of Part 1 paragraph 3(a).
- 2.3 In the senior school, the school's GCSE and A-level results in the years 2019 to 2021 confirm that teaching enables pupils to make good progress in the context of Part 1 paragraph 3(a).
- 2.4 The curriculum is documented, supported by appropriate plans and schemes of work for the pupils and covers the required breadth of material. The teaching enables pupils to make good progress, encompasses effective behaviour management and is supported by suitable resources. A suitable framework for the assessment of pupils' performance is in place.
- 2.5 Pupils receive relationships education in the prep school and relationships and sex education in the senior school, except in so far as they are lawfully excused. The school has consulted parents and published a written statement of its policy which has regard to the relevant statutory guidance.
- 2.6 The standards relating to the quality of education [paragraphs 1–4] are met.**

PART 2 – Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

- 2.7 Principles and values are actively promoted which facilitate the personal development of pupils as responsible, tolerant, law-abiding citizens.
- 2.8 The standard relating to spiritual, moral, social and cultural development [paragraph 5] is met.**

PART 3 – Welfare, health and safety of pupils

- 2.9 Arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils by means that pay due regard to current statutory guidance; good behaviour is promoted; bullying is prevented so far as reasonably practicable; health and safety requirements are met, including those relating to fire safety; provision is made for first aid. Pupils are properly supervised; admission and attendance registers are maintained, as required, and there is a strategic approach to risk assessment. A disability access plan is in place.
- 2.10 The standards relating to welfare, health and safety [paragraphs 6–16], the requirement of Schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010, and the ban on corporal punishment under section 548 of the Education Act 1996 are met.**

PART 4 – Suitability of staff, supply staff, and proprietors

- 2.11 The school makes appropriate checks to ensure the suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors, and a register is kept as required.
- 2.12 The standards relating to the suitability of those in contact with pupils at the school [paragraphs 17–21] are met.**

PART 5 – Premises of and accommodation at schools

2.13 Suitable toilet and changing facilities, and showering facilities where required by the standard, and appropriate accommodation for pupils' medical and therapy needs are provided. The premises are maintained to a standard commensurate with health and safety; acoustics and lighting are appropriate; water provision is adequate. Suitable outdoor space is provided for physical education and outdoor play.

2.14 The standards relating to the premises and accommodation [paragraphs 22–31] are met.

PART 6 – Provision of information

2.15 A range of information is published, provided or made available to parents, inspectors and the Department for Education. This includes details about the proprietor, the ethos of the school and the curriculum, and of the school's arrangements for admission, behaviour and exclusions, bullying, health and safety, first aid, details of the complaints procedure, and the number of complaints registered under the formal procedure during the preceding school year, and the provision for any with education, health and care plans or English as an additional language. It also includes particulars of the school's academic performance during the preceding school year, inspection reports and (for parents only) a report at least annually of their own child's progress. The safeguarding policy is posted on the school's website.

2.16 The standard relating to the provision of information [paragraph 32] is met.

PART 7 – Manner in which complaints are handled

2.17 Parental complaints, if any, are handled effectively through a three-stage process, (informal, formal and a hearing before a panel of three, one of whom is independent of the school). Each stage has clear time scales, and at the third stage the panel can make findings and recommendations which are communicated to the complainant. Records are kept appropriately, including of any action taken, whether or not a complaint is successful.

2.18 The standard relating to the handling of complaints [paragraph 33] is met.

PART 8 – Quality of leadership in and management of schools

2.19 The proprietor ensures that the leadership and management demonstrate good skills and knowledge, and fulfil their responsibilities effectively, so that the other standards are consistently met, and they actively promote the well-being of the pupils.

2.20 The standard relating to leadership and management of the school [paragraph 34] is met.

3. Educational Quality Inspection

Preface

The **EDUCATIONAL QUALITY** inspection reports on the quality of the school's work. It focuses on the two key outcomes:

- The achievement of the pupils, including their academic development, and
- The personal development of the pupils.

The headline judgements apply one of the ISI descriptors 'excellent', 'good', 'sound' or 'unsatisfactory'.

Where necessary, National Curriculum nomenclature is used to refer to year groups in the school. Where the school's own names differ from those used nationally, the details are given in the table below:

<i>School name</i>	<i>National Curriculum name</i>
Reception	Reception
Prep 1	Year 1
Prep 2	Year 2
Prep 3	Year 3
Prep 4	Year 4
Prep 5	Year 5
Prep 6	Year 6
Form 1	Year 7
Form 2	Year 8
Form 3	Year 9
Form 4	Year 10
Form 5	Year 11
Lower Sixth	Year 12
Upper Sixth	Year 13

Key findings

3.1 The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements is excellent.

- Pupils have excellent attitudes towards their learning and their knowledge, understanding and skills are highly developed.
- Pupils throughout the school are highly effective communicators.
- Pupils are extremely reflective and have well-developed study skills.
- Pupils make effective use of information and communication technology (ICT) in most areas of the curriculum.

3.2 The quality of the pupils' personal development is excellent.

- Pupils' understanding of spirituality is excellent and permeates all areas of school life.
- Pupils have a high level of social awareness, and their collaboration skills are strong.
- Pupils have an excellent moral understanding and readily take responsibility for their behaviour.
- Pupils are extremely respectful towards one another and value diversity within the school community.

Recommendation

3.3 The school should make the following improvement:

- Enable pupils to further develop their use of ICT across the curriculum.

The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements

3.4 The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements is excellent.

3.5 Pupils make excellent progress in their academic studies as evidenced by the school's internal assessments, lesson observations and scrutiny of pupils' written work. Pupils benefit from the highly effective tracking system in place across the prep and senior schools giving them regular feedback, enabling them to make rapid progress. Results at GCSE and A level in 2019 were above the national average and even stronger in 2020 and 2021. Pupils with SEND and EAL achieve in line with their peers because the support provided shows detailed understanding of the most effective ways to aid their learning. More able pupils achieve strongly in all areas as a result of the challenging extension work provided in class and the programme of additional activities. The recent introduction of the Pre-Senior Baccalaureate (PSB) in the prep school has led to a review of its methods of assessment. For children in the EYFS through to pupils in Year 6 this includes assessment of a range of skills in addition to their academic achievement. Pupils' successes in external examinations enable them to achieve places at their first choice of university, including many with demanding entry requirements.

3.6 Pupils demonstrate excellent knowledge and skills across all areas of the curriculum and their strong creative talents were in evidence throughout the school in displays of art, textile and design projects. They respond extremely well to the varied nature of the tasks they are given. In pre-inspection questionnaire responses, almost all parents and most pupils felt that teachers help pupils to make progress. In interviews, pupils spoke very highly of the support they receive from their teachers which enables them to further develop their understanding. Pupils in the prep school displayed a high level of skill when practising for their end of term musical and in particular their confident playing of the gamelan. The sustained focus of Year 4 pupils enabled them to develop an excellent understanding of alliteration in rhyming poetry. In a science lesson, Year 7 pupils built on their knowledge and understanding of the skills of scientific enquiry through their investigation of electrical circuitry. Pupils are challenged to clarify their understanding when responding to the effective questioning techniques employed by their teachers. For example, in a religious studies lesson, pupils were able to describe perceptively the differences between brain and mind, and body and soul. Pupils benefitted greatly from the use of a structured framework to support analytical writing.

3.7 Pupils' communication skills across the school are excellent, both in lessons, where they use subject-specific terminology accurately, and in wider school interactions. In all conversations with inspectors, pupils discussed their views confidently. They feel that the school's emphasis on *Courage, Courtesy and Compassion* plays a major role in how they interact with other pupils in lessons and beyond the classroom. For example, they work together to discuss topics in most lessons and are encouraged to help someone who may be finding this difficult. In modern foreign languages, pupils speak with very good accents and show evident pleasure in speaking the target language. In a prep school mathematics lesson, pupils displayed an excellent knowledge of spelling patterns when discussing the spelling of *quarter*. Pupils listen attentively and courteously to each other and almost always understand the idea of taking it in turn to speak. Pupils' written work contained some extremely high-

quality examples of creative writing, and they develop their reading skills through the school's initiative for everyone to read one morning each week. A sixth-form pupil's presentation on capital punishment showed an excellent understanding of how to communicate both sides of an argument. In drama lessons, pupils skilfully communicated their characterisations with the audience. Pupils further develop their communication skills through their participation in weekly assemblies where they often read a story or poetry, or lead prayers.

- 3.8 Pupils of all ages are extremely confident in their use of numeracy in many areas across the curriculum. Examination results in mathematics at GCSE are high and achievement in the prep school is strong. Pupils in Year 5 displayed excellent levels of knowledge when discussing the relationship between mixed numbers and improper fractions. Children in EYFS confidently make number bonds for numbers adding to ten. In a GCSE chemistry lesson, pupils plotted the results from their experiment to produce a graph: they then thoughtfully considered the reasons for the differences between their graphs, such as the accuracy in reading thermometers to obtain the data. Pupils in a Year 8 lesson on financial management, successfully applied their numerical skills to develop their understanding of interest rates, personal finances and budgeting. In a Year 10 biology lesson on abiotic and biotic factors, pupils confidently use quadrats to collect and collate information from a picture of a field of daisies when investigating random sampling.
- 3.9 Pupils are highly proficient in their use of information and communication technology (ICT) which they view as a natural part of their learning. They report that their skills developed rapidly during the period of online learning, and they are adept at holding meetings online. Throughout the school, pupils use ICT confidently to conduct research, prepare presentations and use subject specific software to enhance their learning. Pupils with SEND make excellent use of technology to enrich, enhance and support their learning. Pupils in the prep school working on their individual projects make excellent use of ICT to carry out their research. Sixth form pupils who are completing an extended project said that by using a range of commercial software they can improve the quality of their finished work. Children in EYFS have a good level of understanding about how to use an ICT programme in mathematics and pupils in Year 3 demonstrated their competence in producing animation. In art, pupils use software to manipulate images in their preliminary work and in design technology pupils confidently use ICT in the design process. In an A-level lesson, pupils work collaboratively on one document where they add their annotations and ideas to those of the teacher. In music lessons, pupils extremely successfully created variations to a piece of music and pupils commented how well the ICT resources support their creativity. The use of ICT could be further developed to enhance pupils' learning consistently across the curriculum by extending its use beyond online research. Leadership and management have already identified this as an area for development and have prepared a plan to implement this.
- 3.10 Throughout the school, pupils have strong study skills and demonstrate excellent attitudes towards learning with most pupils confident in directing their own learning. In this context the school very successfully fulfils its aim to promote an environment of academic endeavour and personal discipline. Pupils have developed these skills as a result of the challenging teaching and recent curriculum developments. In the prep school, the introduction of an extended project, Prep School Project Qualification, has enabled pupils to demonstrate higher level study skills and employ a wide range of resources. Pupils were extremely enthusiastic about choosing their own topics, such as animal extinction and making the best chocolate cake, and then completing the projects independently. In the senior school, pupils in Year 7 respond positively to the intellectual challenges posed by the recently introduced *Big Question* lessons where they are rapidly developing their ability to use higher-order thinking skills. Pupils in a Year 9 history class demonstrated a high level of historical enquiry and utilised their skills in using source material to establish the causes and the events leading up to the Final Solution. In a Year 10 chemistry lesson, pupils hypothesised accurately about the effect of temperature variation on particles. Sixth form pupils working on their extended project valued the opportunities provided to develop writing skills in different genres to that required by their A-levels. Pupils commented intelligently about the reliability of internet-based sources.

- 3.11 Pupils achieve success in a wide range of academic and other achievements. Pupils throughout the school participate with obvious enthusiasm in the broad extra-curricular programme and the school actively encourages pupils to try new activities. Pupils have competed at local, county and national levels in a number of sports with the senior school basketball teams being particularly successful. In the prep school, pupils spoke about their pride in winning the district football competition but commented that they feel that taking part is more important than winning. Prep school pupils have also enjoyed success at a high level in fencing. Many pupils achieve bronze, silver and gold awards in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. Results in science Olympiads and UK mathematics challenges are excellent and many pupils achieve strong results in music examinations. Pupils have also achieved success in external art and essay competitions. Pupils spoke proudly of their participation in music and drama presentations in school and in house competitions.

The quality of the pupils' personal development

- 3.12 The quality of the pupils' personal development is excellent.
- 3.13 Pupils of all ages, develop notably strong levels of self-discipline and self-esteem, in line with the school's aim to nurture in pupils the development of their own best standard within the Columban virtues of courage, courtesy and compassion. This is a result of the importance senior leaders place on developing pupils' self-confidence and was evident in the strong culture of support provided by staff throughout the school. Pupils respond extremely positively to their teachers' encouragement to persevere when they encounter problems. Children in the EYFS displayed high levels of self-esteem and self-confidence when talking about their feelings and pupils in the prep school demonstrated their self-confidence by choosing to tackle more challenging tasks in their mathematics lesson. In senior school lessons pupils evaluate their work and complete self-assessment sheets to identify areas for development. In a GCSE physics class, pupils appreciated the step-by-step framework provided by their teacher as this gave them the confidence to tackle similar problems independently. Pupils in the prep school spoke about how well-prepared they feel for moving into the senior school through the regular contact they have with pupils and staff from the senior school. Pupils in the sixth form feel confident in moving to university because of the targeted support they receive from staff during the university application process.
- 3.14 Pupils fully understand the consequences of their own actions, and this influences their well-developed decision-making skills. Pupils' decisions in the school council have led to the introduction of first aid training for pupils in the prep school, and in the senior school to the decision to install an artificial grass area for sports. Through relationships, sex and health education lessons, pupils are enabled to make informed choices and decisions about consent and relationships. Pupils in Year 4 demonstrated strong decision-making skills as they developed and directed their own commercials. In a Year 9 tutor lesson, pupils made thoughtful decisions about what constitutes fake news and how people of different ages may be duped by it. Sixth-form pupils spoke about how they made their decisions to apply for roles of responsibility, citing the desire to give something back to the school and help younger pupils. Pupils believe that all the decisions they have to make are guided by staff who really care.
- 3.15 Pupils develop a deep spiritual understanding and a profound appreciation of non-materialistic aspects of life. Pupils have a high regard for the ethos of the school which is to provide an education rooted in Christian values. The chapel is an important element in the life of the school and pupils spoke of the importance to them of a quiet space for reflection, regardless of their beliefs. In a poetry lesson, pupils reflected on the spiritual aspects of life and death in the poem *In Praise of My Mother*. Children in the EYFS respectfully joined in prayers for others who were unwell. The chamber choir, together with the contributions of other pupils through prayers and readings, created an atmosphere of calm reflection in the prep school assembly. Pupils studying art have an excellent appreciation of how art impacts positively on their lives, promoting a strong sense of spirituality. The inspiring displays of art around the school foster pupils' appreciation of non-materialistic aspects of life. In a Year 7 lesson,

pupils discussed different types of eco-fiction, demonstrating an excellent level of appreciation of the spiritual aspects of mysticism.

- 3.16 Pupils have a strong understanding of right and wrong and take responsibility for their own behaviour. They have an excellent understanding of the consequences of behaving inappropriately and feel that the school deals with any such incidents swiftly and effectively. They appreciate the school's emphasis on pupils learning from mistakes and they feel that rewards and sanctions are fair. In the questionnaire, almost all pupils felt that the school expects pupils to behave well but a few pupils felt that some do not always treat others with kindness or respect. Inspectors spoke to a significant number of pupils who did not support these comments. Pupils feel that the school ethos is extremely important in guiding their behaviour and incidents of unkindness are few and quickly resolved. In lessons, pupils develop their moral compass through discussions about the rights and wrongs of topics such as hunting, the death penalty, abortion and euthanasia. They confidently share their opinions and express their viewpoints on what they believe is right and how to make the world a better place.
- 3.17 Pupils enjoy working collaboratively and do so extremely well in lessons and beyond. Younger pupils worked together effectively, to analyse characters and events in a story. Pupils in the prep school spoke enthusiastically about how effectively they interact with pupils within and across the year groups. For example, one group had cracked a code as a result of their effective collaboration and in the playground, they taught each other how to solve puzzles. In the senior school pupils support each other to further develop their keyboard skills in music lessons. In art lessons, pupils collaborate to peer assess their work and support each other to enhance the finished pieces. The school's programme of house activities fosters a strong sense of collaboration as pupils of all ages work together to prepare for house competitions. Older pupils work together, highly effectively, to plan and deliver chapel services and assemblies on a range of topical issues.
- 3.18 Pupils are extremely enthusiastic in their contributions to the school and wider community, and service is a key part of the school's ethos. The oldest pupils in the prep school carry out their prefect responsibilities conscientiously, supporting the younger pupils. Sixth-form pupils are keen to apply for one of a number of posts of responsibility out of a desire to serve and give something back to the school community. Pupils in Year 7 spoke of their appreciation of the support they have received from their sixth-form buddies. Throughout the school, pupils work together to raise funds for a number of local and national charities with many of these activities being organised by pupils. Pupils continue to support the annual St Alban's sleepout raising a significant sum in recent years. School choirs visit local care homes, and pupils volunteer to help with local community projects such as the half marathon held in the city. Sixth form pupils have supported a sister school in Zambia with fund-raising and an annual working visit.
- 3.19 Pupils throughout the school show great respect for members of the school community. They readily welcome pupils from different backgrounds and are highly respectful of those with faiths different to their own. Pupils commented that while the school is a Catholic foundation, all opinions are listened to, pupils feel valued and all religions are respected. Pupils spoke highly of the manner in which the school had prepared for the arrival of female pupils in September 2021, including a review of curriculum content and resources. In the prep school, pupils' appreciation and understanding of Japanese culture was clearly evident in their music lesson. In a discussion on fake news, pupils demonstrated an extremely mature attitude towards the diversity of views and culture of others. Pupils attribute their strong attitudes of respect and tolerance to the range of topics covered regularly in tutor lessons. They feel confident to share their views as they know they will be listened to and respected.
- 3.20 Pupils have an excellent understanding of how to keep healthy both physically and mentally. They understand the importance of a healthy diet, exercise, and a balanced lifestyle. In questionnaire responses a few pupils felt that the school does not encourage them to be healthy. Inspection evidence did not support this view. Inspectors found that there are a wide range of physical activities available to pupils, in addition to curriculum lessons, and at break and lunchtimes many pupils were

engaged in physical exercise. Although the dining room offers a broad range of healthy options, including salad and fruit, inspectors observed that pupils did not always make balanced choices. During the previous academic year, the school identified that pupils would benefit from additional support with their mental health and the governors allocated further resources to train members of staff as listeners. Pupils told inspectors that they value the high priority the school has given to supporting their mental health. Pupils are confident they know how to keep safe online and in their personal lives. Pupils' excellent personal development is reflected in their readiness to seek advice from the pastoral staff, of whom the pupils spoke very highly.

4. Inspection Evidence

- 4.1 The inspectors observed lessons, had discussions with pupils and examined samples of pupils' work. They held discussions with members of staff and with a group of governors, observed a sample of the extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection period, and attended form meetings and assemblies. Inspectors visited the facilities for the youngest pupils, together with the learning support and educational resource areas. Inspectors considered the responses of parents, staff and pupils to pre-inspection questionnaires. The inspectors examined curriculum and other documentation made available by the school.

Inspectors

Mrs Fiona McGill	Reporting inspector
Mr Mark Burley	Compliance team inspector (Deputy head, IAPS school)
Mrs Angela Clancy	Team inspector (Former head of department, HMC school)
Mr Christian Kendall-Daw	Team inspector (Deputy head, HMC school)
Mrs Sandra Teacher	Team inspector
Mr Patrick Wenham	Team inspector (Former head, IAPS school)