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## Raising standards through literacy: Cardinal Hume Catholic School

**URN:** 137852

**Local authority:** Gateshead

**Date published:** 12 September 2013

**Reference:** 130209

### Brief description

Cardinal Hume Catholic School has been highly successful in raising standards through a focus on reading, speaking and listening, and writing – including writing across the curriculum. In 2012, the school was in the top 1% of schools by 'value-added' (a measure of the progress students make between different stages of education), and the proportion of students gaining at least a C in GCSE English was 96%. The school has been highly successful in raising the aspirations of students in an area of above average deprivation.

### Overview – the school's message

'We have been highly successful in raising standards. In English, our results are more than outstanding. 96% of our students achieve a grade C or better, with 98% making at least three levels of progress and 76% at least four levels.

Underlying that success there has been a variety of factors. The school is a calm and well-ordered environment. We have worked hard to raise the aspirations of our students. Our pastoral and support structures are highly effective and we have strong links with parents. We invest a huge effort in establishing habits of learning.

We see literacy as key to raising standards. In addition, we believe we have a moral obligation to develop high standards of literacy as it is essential to our humanity. We develop reading exceptionally well. We use active learning that encourages students to discuss and express themselves. Our English department uses structured approaches to developing writing with a strong emphasis on grammar. Extended writing is developed in a consistent way across the curriculum.

No single technique or resource is a magic bullet. However, through the team work and dedication of our skilled staff we are preparing our students exceptionally well for their future education and careers.'

*Nick Hurn, Headteacher*

## The good practice in detail

Cardinal Hume Catholic School has been highly successful in raising standards through literacy. As recently as seven years ago, poor literacy skills had meant that some students could not access the curriculum. Now standards are high. The school's progress measures are immensely strong. What causes such outcomes? Why, for example, are GCSE results in English so high in a school with an above-average number of students entitled to free school meals? How can literacy be fostered in a way that makes an impact right across the curriculum, and that enriches students' lives?

The main drivers for success have been:

- the development of a culture of learning
- the fostering of reading
- developing speaking and listening, especially in group work
- structured approaches to grammar, punctuation and sentence construction in English
- consistent approaches to extended writing across the curriculum.

The school's [summary diagram](#) shows a map of literacy through all subjects and key stages.

## Developing a culture of learning

Assistant headteacher, Martine Murphy, sees the development of a culture of learning as particularly important. Parents, carers and students understand the emphasis on high standards of conduct. Each morning, form tutors check that students are equipped and ready for the school day. This is done rigorously as it is a key and non-negotiable part of the



school's routine. That equipment always includes two reading books, and these are read every day.

Emphasis is also placed on the development of habits of learning. 'We find many approaches to habits of learning currently used in schools far too bitty,' says Martine. Instead, the school places a focus on single areas for each year group that are built on and added to each year. So Year 7 emphasises 'persistence', Year 8 'thinking about thinking' (metacognition), Year 9 'managing

impulsivity' and Year 10 'learning continuously'. These themes are developed across all aspects of students' work. The first theme of 'persistence' is seen as having a particularly strong link with literacy.

One of the keys to developing a school culture is making sure that there is consistency across the whole staff, and so monitoring is important. It is also of key importance that new staff are instated thoroughly into the life of the school, through the [school's induction programme](#).

## Fostering reading

Every student is tested for reading ability at the start of Year 7 and at 10-weekly intervals after that. The library contains a wide selection of books that are classified by reading difficulty. Students choose books appropriate for their ability and, having read them, take an [online test](#). Results from the tests are monitored to make sure that students are making progress and are reading at the correct level. Reading becomes quite competitive as classroom displays show how many books students have read.



Students read during the daily form period and, each week, all students in Years 7 and 8 read silently for 30 minutes at one lunch time during the week. The Learning Support department plays an important role in supporting students who have difficulty with reading.

Students say that they are now reading more than at their primary schools and that they enjoy the challenge of reading a wider range of books. Data show that their reading ages are moving up faster than their chronological ages. Students have two reading books in school each day. 'There is no such thing as a reluctant reader provided students have access to books of the appropriate level,' says Brendan Robson, Assistant Headteacher.

## Developing speaking and listening

Teachers place great emphasis on the correct use of English and correct technical vocabulary in each subject. 'We absolutely do not dumb language down. Language is our most precious gift,' says Andrea McGuigan, head of history.



Group work has increased across the school. One of several action research groups leads on these developments and its members lead seminars for teachers to help develop their practice. School monitoring shows that productive group work is expanding. It is leading to higher levels of student engagement where students understand the variety of roles they can take in such work. This is leading to enriched student talk, which is often an essential

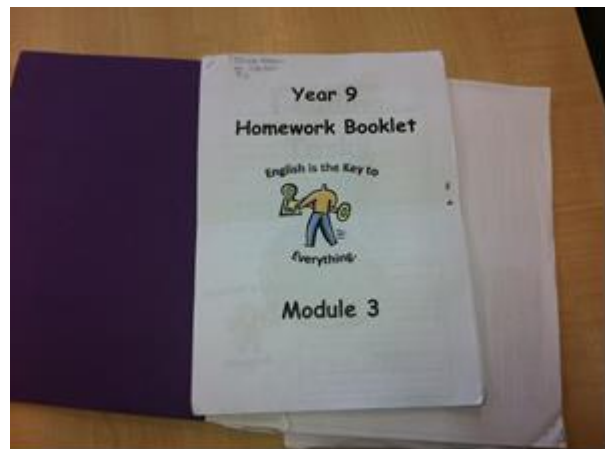
precursor to extended writing.

History and geography use a [presentation skills builder](#) and a [humanities passport](#) to help students record and assess the development of their wider skills in presenting, speaking and listening.

In Key Stage 5, tutor time on Mondays and Wednesdays is directed towards culture and current affairs. Pairs of students select a topic and prepare an oral presentation to their fellow tutees. As a whole, Key Stage 5 tutor time seeks to promote research, reading, information extraction skills and oral literacy.

## Structured approaches to grammar, punctuation and sentence construction

The achievement of students in English by the end of Year 11 is very high. School leaders see this as the fruit of high-quality teaching from Year 7 and not something achieved right at the end of the course. Teaching programmes for English in Years 7 and 8 are highly structured, with a strong emphasis on grammar, punctuation and sentence construction. This is supported by similarly structured homework. These tight systems are not seen as a way of reducing the creativity of teachers. Rather they set clear expectations for progress and so are guidelines within which creativity can flourish. Each module of work in Years 7 and 8 seeks to develop students' reading, writing, speaking and listening. Senior leaders see progress in Key Stage 3 as critical to the raising of standards throughout the school. The key stage is emphatically not seen as a mere waiting room for GCSE. However, when students start Year 9 with high standards of literacy they are fully able to access the curriculum and enjoy their learning.



This [target setting sheet](#) illustrates the content of the first module, and also shows the targets that students would be setting for their reading at an early point in Year 7.

All students take either French or Spanish in Years 7 and 8. Teachers in these subjects see a vital role in developing grammar awareness. Ian Stanton, head of department explains: 'Looking at grammar in another language allows an objective view of one's own language. We see this structure as more important than even vocabulary. Every lesson has a grammar focus, and this grammar leads to a rich development of language in the classroom.'

## Writing across the curriculum

In approaching writing across the curriculum, school leaders took the view that some straightforward approaches were likely to be the most successful. Across the school there has been a focus on connective words and phrases, and on spelling, punctuation and grammar. Resources to support these are placed in a literacy box; teachers have this as an actual physical box, and as an on-screen icon on the school's shared desk-top. Resources include a [connectives mat](#) and a [punctuation triangle](#).

In addition, departments use diagrams to help students plan their written work. Many subjects, including science, use [thinking maps](#) as a structure, while history and geography use [planning pyramids](#) which help students establish the most important points to make, to establish links with causal points and to maintain a sustained analysis. The structure helps students of widely differing abilities to produce coherent arguments. Amanda, a student in Year 12, says: 'The consistency of approaches to writing across the school really helps me.'

Andrea Riley, Deputy Headteacher, sums up the approach: 'Just as there is no such thing as a reluctant reader, there is no such thing as a reluctant writer: simply children who have not been taught well enough. We supply confidence, simple tools to use and a love for language. The results speak for themselves.'

## The school's background



[Cardinal Hume Catholic School](#) is an academy in Gateshead. Previously the Edmund Campion Catholic School, it changed its name when it moved to its current site with a new building in 2007. There are about 1200 students on roll. Currently 33% of students are known to be eligible for free school meals compared to the national average of 27%.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch.