

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

Thomas Whitehead Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School

Angels Lane, Houghton Regis, Dunstable, LU5 5HH	
Current SIAMS inspection grade	Satisfactory
Diocese	St Albans
Previous SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Local authority / Date of academy conversion	Central Bedfordshire / 1 April 2017
Name of multi academy trust	Diocese of St Albans
Date of inspection	2 March 2017
Date of last inspection	17 November 2011
Type of school and unique reference number	Primary 109701
Interim Executive Headteacher	Alison Simpson
Acting Head of School	Stef Jones
Inspector's name and number	Lindsay Fraser

School context

Thomas Whitehead is an average-sized primary school. The majority of pupils are from a White British heritage. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for the pupil premium, which provides additional funding for looked-after children and those eligible for free school meals, is above average. The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs is average; the proportion of those that have a statement or an education, health and care plan is slightly above the national average. Since the previous inspection the school has opened a pre-school on-site provision that provides for two-year-olds. The school has also become a primary school by extending its age range to include pupils in Years 5 and 6. The most recent Ofsted report (November 2015) placed the school in special measures. Within the last year the leadership of the school has been subject to many changes. The school is due to become a diocesan academy in the multi academy trust within the near future.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of Thomas Whitehead Primary School as a Church of England school are satisfactory

- The school's strong Christian values are well embedded within the school, leading to good behaviour and very supportive relationships between all members of the school community.
- Learning behaviours, based on Christian values, are beginning to have a positive impact on pupils' approach to learning. However, recent progress in achievement is not yet securely embedded because the school does not ensure that every pupil reaches their academic potential.
- All members of the community value collective worship as an important and meaningful part of the school day.
- Prayer is a significant aspect of pupils' developing spirituality and many pupils find prayer helps them to manage challenges in their lives.
- Issues raised in the previous inspection have only been partly addressed.

Areas to improve

- Develop a vision which is based on explicitly Christian values so that all school leaders can articulate and it and use it to evaluate its impact on the achievements and well-being of all pupils.
- Give pupils greater involvement in the planning and delivery of worship to further their spiritual development.

The school, through its distinctive Christian character, is good at meeting the needs of all learners

Christian values play a significant part in the life and ethos of the school. They form the basis of themes in collective worship which gives them an explicitly Christian interpretation. Pupils can therefore relate their values to a range of biblical stories. The high quality of relationships throughout the school, characterised by care and trust between pupils and adults, is underpinned by values and makes a positive contribution to pupils' personal development. Parents are fully aware of the school values because they are well informed by school newsletters. Pupils are keen to discuss their values at home and the impact upon their behaviour. For example, a pupil who had been worried told his parents that he was using the words 'be bold, be strong' from biblical stories and collective worship songs to help him manage his fears. Pupils are confident in explaining to their parents how the staff, through references to Christian values, have helped them to improve their behaviour. Forgiveness, one of the school's three core values, is clearly demonstrated and understood in dealing with the rare occasions of behaviour. Despite recent changes in leadership the staff have remained totally committed to the support of pupils and their families and to raising standards. Parents fully appreciate that senior staff are always available to address any concerns or need for further support. The recently introduced pupil learning behaviours, based on the school's Christian values, together with the improved assessment systems have yet to improve the progress of all pupils. However, improvements to the quality of teaching and learning are evident. Support and intervention for pupils with greater needs have improved considerably and these pupils are now making better progress. The school has been working hard to improve pupils' attendance in the school. However, this remains below the national average. The school is exploring strategies to work with families, based on mutual responsibility, to ensure pupils attend school regularly. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC) is clearly based on Christian values. Pupils are eager to be involved in events which promote Christian citizenship and charity by supporting a range of fund-raising events. For example, Year 6 pupils organise fund-raising to sponsor a child through Plan International. Staff and pupils have a clear understanding of spirituality. Many opportunities are given throughout the curriculum for pupils to reflect and respond to a range of profound questions about life experiences and the world around them. The school environment is conducive to reflection because there are dedicated reflection areas in each classroom which include artefacts and pupils' own prayers. The new curriculum in religious education (RE) is beginning to extend these experiences by encouraging pupils to debate issues such as differences in belief. For example, pupils in Year 6 discuss creation through biblical accounts and scientific understanding. One pupil, reflecting similar experiences of other pupils, now has the confidence to discuss with her father their differing views on Christian faith. Pupils are beginning to understand the concept of empathy and why people may behave and think differently. They are very keen to learn about the faith and beliefs of others so that they can further understand the impact of faith and culture on people's actions. Pupils who experienced the recent faith tour state that this enabled them to think more deeply about their own beliefs and beliefs of others. The school has strenuously encouraged parents to support their pupils' participation in the faith tour, but without total engagement. Pupils have a developing understanding of the role the church plays locally because they are involved in activities within the local Anglican and Baptist churches. They are also aware that Christianity is a faith that is practised throughout the world.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good

Collective worship underpins all aspects of the school. Based on Christian values, the church year and the needs of pupils, collective worship is important to all the school community. Planning is thorough and ensures that pupils have a good understanding of Jesus Christ and Anglican worship. The regularity of Christian greetings, responses and the use of the Lord's prayer enable pupils to have a good understanding of Christian traditions in worship. Pupils appreciate this familiarity and consistency. Pupils regard worship as relevant to the whole school community. This is because staff participate enthusiastically in worship. Teaching staff all lead their weekly class worship and regularly lead whole school worship. They are confident in doing so because of the embedded Christian practices and the thorough planning of senior leaders. However, the consistency of delivery is not monitored other than by recording the story used. Pupils participate in worship in a number of ways. These include the writing of prayers, feedback on what they have learned from collective worship and taking part in the reading of a story or drama. There are as yet no opportunities for pupils to be involved in planning and delivering worship. Both pupils and staff have identified this as an area for development. Prayer is very important to pupils, many of whom frequently write their own prayers and often share these with their families. Pupils respond well in acts of worship and are attentive and eager to participate. They respond with appropriate respect when it is time to pray or be still. Pupils have some understanding of the Trinity and the school action plan includes measures to develop this further. The major festivals are celebrated in church and are well attended by parents. Weekly worship takes place in the church every Monday morning. All members of the school community value this time and feel that it starts the week in a positive way because of the emphasis on spiritual preparation for teaching and learning. Parents are also invited to attend. Whilst attendance of parents at the celebration of major festivals in the church is high, few parents currently attend the weekly worship. Some monitoring and evaluation has taken place, but no established system is in place to assess the impact of collective worship and ways in which to improve planning and delivery.

The effectiveness of the religious education is satisfactory

The school is striving to raise standards throughout the curriculum and leaders are making strenuous efforts to quickly improve the quality of teaching and learning in RE. The previous inspection highlighted the raising of standards in RE as a focus for development. This has yet to be fully addressed. RE is regarded as an important subject by staff and pupils. However, the quality of teaching at present is variable. Teaching and learning do not always encourage pupils to extend their knowledge and understanding of Christianity and other faiths. At its best, teaching challenges pupils and places an emphasis on developing critical thought. Pupils respond well to this and do so with enthusiasm when inspired to think deeply, creatively and form opinions. Older pupils in particular can quickly refer to a range of topics which have particularly interested them. They regard the subject as especially relevant to themselves in today's world. There are not yet enough opportunities consistently applied across the school that challenge pupils to explore concepts and ideas at a deeper level. Work in books shows little evidence of tasks being matched to the abilities of different pupils. The RE subject leaders have a clear understanding of what improvements are needed in the teaching of the subject. This is because they are well informed about current developments and expectations. Consequently, they have become rigorous in their monitoring of classroom teaching and checking of pupils' work. Their feedback to teachers is beginning to impact upon the quality of planning, resulting in more structured lessons. There is evidence that pupils are making progress, but the school's own assessment procedures have not been fully developed. Therefore, there is no clear evidence of the actual progress pupils make across the school in relation to their starting points. A tracking system has been introduced, but it is not yet sufficiently embedded to effectively identify and measure pupils' progress. Following recent training, teachers are feeling more confident and enthusiastic about teaching the new content and themes of the 'Understanding Christianity' project. Pupils also learn about a range of other faiths and there is evidence that they are developing a sound knowledge of beliefs and practices.

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of the school as a church school is satisfactory

School leaders including governors have a clear grasp of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. However, governors have yet to make clear links between the distinctive Christian character of the school and its impact upon pupil progress and attainment. This is because the vision is expressed in terms of opportunities provided rather than a commitment to ensuring every pupil will achieve their potential. In addition, the vision is not articulated in explicit Christian terms through which its influence on pupils' attainment can be evaluated. Without this clarity monitoring and evaluation have not been possible. The current senior leadership team, made up of the interim executive headteacher, acting head of school and assistant headteacher are taking decisive actions to improve standards in teaching and learning across the school. This follows the Ofsted report in 2015, which placed the school in special measures. Their actions are leading to improvements. They are also providing improved information for the governing body, enabling them now to monitor achievement and progress. However, this is still in its very early stages. Monitoring of those pupils most likely to underachieve has been more robust. As a result, leaders are making more effective use of the pupil premium grant; this is accelerating the progress of the most vulnerable pupils. It is acknowledged that this attention to the progress of more vulnerable pupils has yet to be extended to all pupils. There is no regular agenda item in governing body meetings to discuss the impact of the Christian character on pupils' experience in school. However, school policies developed by senior staff do make reference to the school's Christian values. Senior leaders and governors took the decision in recent years to extend school provision to accommodate children from the age of two. The decision was taken in the belief that, as a church school, earlier provision and intervention for younger pupils, especially the more vulnerable, was likely to improve standards and well-being. Effective relationships with parents at an earlier stage are contributing to a better shared understanding of pupils' needs and how to address them with evidence of improved pupil development. The leadership and management of the school are only satisfactory as not all key issues from the last inspection have been addressed. This has been recognised by governors and school leaders and the issues are part of the RE and collective worship action plans. The school has been very well supported by the diocese and external agencies in the journey to address all areas highlighted for development in the previous Ofsted inspection. The head of school works closely with local schools and her collaboration with a local church school is contributing to improvements in RE. Senior leaders and other staff have been well supported in their professional development provided by the diocese. Visits to outstanding church schools have aided in the improvements for collective worship. The school meets the statutory requirements for collective worship and religious education. It has very good relationships with parents, although parents have little involvement in the life of the school. The school is taking steps to address this. The partnership with the local church has improved greatly over the past two years since the appointment of the current incumbent. His involvement through church worship and visiting RE lessons has been of benefit to pupils, staff and parents.

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