

National Society Statutory Inspection of Anglican Schools Report

John Donne Church of England Voluntary Aided Lower School

High Street, Blunham, Bedford MK44 3NL

Diocese St Albans

Local authority: Bedfordshire
Date of inspection: 27th March 2012
Date of last inspection: 16th October 2008
School's unique reference number: 109615
Headteacher: Judi Johnson-Clarke
Inspector's name and number: Alan Thornsbys 137

School context

John Donne Lower School is a small primary school that serves pupils from a mainly White British heritage. The proportions of pupils entitled to free school meals and those with special educational needs are below national averages. Since the last inspection a new headteacher has been appointed and provision for Early Years Foundation stage built. The school has gained a number of nationally recognised awards including Healthy Schools and Sports Active mark awards.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of John Donne as a Church of England school are good.

John Donne is a good church school because of the commitment of everyone to on-going development as a church school. This results in a secure Christian ethos where confident pupils are nurtured to develop academically and personally because of the impact of Christian love in action.

Established strengths

- The Christian love and care that nurture children's academic and personal development
- The commitment of the leadership, staff and clergy to further development as a church school
- The confidence and knowledge of the children in posing and answering 'big' questions

Focus for development

- Give pupils greater involvement in the planning, delivery and ritual of worship
- Raise standards in religious education through embedding the new syllabus, staff training and effective assessment procedures
- Ensure formal procedures inform foundation governors in their monitoring of the distinctive Christian character of the school

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

The school has a warm and welcoming ethos that reflects the school rules 'Be kind and do as you would be done by.' These are based on Christian values and promote self-respect and respect for other people. Although Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) values have a high profile in the school, links to the teaching of Jesus are implicit. However, many children can relate these to specific stories of Jesus because of their wide biblical knowledge. Relationships between adults and pupils are a strength of the school reflecting mutual respect and Christian love. No one is afraid to show that they care. Pupils are confident and articulate and know that if there are any problems staff listen, discuss and support, especially in times of difficulty. Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural (SMSC) development of pupils is good because of the close relationships between adults and children in school and the high quality of discussion, reflection and questioning. Pupils take responsibility for aspects of school life, including the school environment. They also understand the purpose of the 'buddy bench' to ensure no one is left out. Pupils understand the Christian character of the school and explain that 'Christians believe in God but you can be any faith to come to our school.' They support a range of charities as well as supporting the education of a child in Africa. Staff have high expectations for behaviour and achievement. All pupils are challenged and supported to reach their potential. The teaching commitment of the headteacher gives her a close knowledge of the abilities of each pupil that allows her to support teacher assessment. Throughout the school and in classrooms a range of displays reflect the Christian character of the school. The better of these have prayers and reflective questions to promote pupils thinking. Others such as the 'value of the week' displayed in most classrooms are often not securely linked to Christianity.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good.

Worship themes are planned using the Christian calendar, SEAL and 'Values for Education'. Weekly values give pupils an experience of the range of values and opportunities to revisit them. They are linked to the Christian ethos of the school and supported by diocesan guidelines. Pupils explain worship as 'a time to learn more about God and say prayers' and 'we learn about the gospels and parables of Jesus to learn more about Him.' They have a good awareness of the Christian year and festivals. The range of worship formats includes whole school and class led worship. A monthly service in church led by the vicar, frequently attended by parents and members of the local community, develops the sense of belonging to a worshipping community. Many pupils support and participate in church services, such as 'Mothering Sunday' when many of them join to sing with the church choir. Pupils enjoy whole school worship and make it a joyful occasion because of their anticipation and meaningful and enthusiastic singing with actions. They are fully engaged by the lively delivery of leaders who make the themes relevant to pupils' experiences through the use of shared personal anecdotes. For example, the personal writing of the Easter story in the gospel of John was introduced by diary entries that related to school visits. Pupils then enacted part of the Easter story in a meaningful way. Children are confident and eager to create and share spontaneous prayers related to the worship theme. Although flowers and a wooden cross are brought into worship and placed on a simple focus table, the school does not make regular use of Anglican ritual such as sharing the peace or lighting a candle. On-going monitoring by the coordinator, pupil questionnaires and informal discussion between staff inform evaluation that is shared with governors to inform development.

The effectiveness of the religious education is good.

Religious education has a high profile because of the introduction of a new syllabus. This and diocesan training has given the coordinator renewed enthusiasm. Staff have also benefitted from Inset led by the diocesan advisor. Effective planning is annotated to ensure coverage of the syllabus and attainment targets. End of unit tasks and developing on-going assessment procedures indicate that standards are in line with those in literacy. A strength of teaching is the newly developing questioning skill of teachers. This results in mature and articulate questions from pupils who also are able to offer a range of answers and opinions to further develop their knowledge and understanding of Bible stories. In a series of lesson based in Easter week there was clear progression across the school and in lessons. For example, in the nursery children experience opportunities for questions and answers and show a developing sense of respect and listening to each others points of view. Children further develop their thinking skills as they move through the school. By Year 3 / 4 they have the confidence to explore questions such as 'Why did the religious leaders not like Jesus?' They have a good understanding of the Easter story answering the question 'Why did Jesus not try to stop Judas betraying him?' with 'Jesus knew that he had to die because that is what God wanted. He had to die and come back to life so that people would believe in Him.' Children's understanding of other religions is reinforced by visits to places of worship on the 'Faith tour.' Work in books is often well presented although there is inconsistent use of marking comments relating to learning or to further develop thinking skills.

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

The school is well led and managed by the headteacher and governors. Everyone in school shares the vision of the headteacher for 'excellence and enjoyment for everyone, within a happy and safe Christian environment'. They are all active in providing the challenge and support to achieve this aim. Foundation governors maintain links with the Parochial Church Council and the church. Governors ensure that the Christian distinctiveness of the school is maintained. For example, ensuring the full name of the school is used in documentation and revising the admission policy in light of its Christian families. Governors are kept informed of the school through visits, attending worship and termly reports from the headteacher and coordinator. Foundation governors are involved in assessing the distinctive Christian character of the school. The development points from the previous inspection have been addressed in the school development plan. Subsequent development and results of on-going monitoring also informed strategic planning. This indicates that the school has a good capacity for future development. Parents praise the work of the school and the impact of its values on their children. Many parents chose the school because of its strong faith foundation. They value the formal and informal opportunities to discuss their children's progress with staff. Typical of their many comments are 'Children can have no better start because here they engage children with Christian values' and 'We are like one big family. The teachers and the vicar know the names of all of the children.' The school shares many events with the church and the local village community.