

National Society Statutory Inspection of Anglican Schools Report

St James' Church of England Lower School
Main Road
Biddenham
Bedford
MK40 4BD

Diocese of St Albans

LA: Bedford
SIAS Inspection: 27th April 2012
Previous S23 Inspection: October 2008
URN: 109614
Headteacher: Karen Luscombe
SIAS Inspector Name: Lyn Field
SIAS Inspector No: NS 151

School Context

The school is smaller than the average primary school. The proportions of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs are low. There is a broadly average representation of minority ethnic backgrounds but no pupils are at the early stages of learning English. A recent extension to the building means pupils are now taught in five single-age classes from reception to Year 4.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of a Church of England school are outstanding.

The strong leadership of the headteacher has enabled the school to flourish as a church school at the heart of its community. The importance of faith has a central role in the curriculum. As a result, children demonstrate qualities of respect, compassion and responsibility well beyond their years.

Established strengths

- Excellent partnerships with the Church and local faith groups
- The high quality of teaching and learning in religious education
- The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

Focus for development

- To increase the impact of worship on pupils by providing them with a more active role in planning, leading and evaluating worship.

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

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils is exceptionally high for their age. This is because teachers make the most of every opportunity to discuss questions of faith with them across all areas of the curriculum. Pupils are very aware of seasonal changes in the school grounds and regularly make use of the Discovery Garden. It is easily transformed into an area for worship so pupils understand how an outdoor or indoor space can take on a spiritual dimension. Spiritual areas are being developed in classrooms, each with its own distinctive character. One for example takes the form of a peace tree. Although this variety enriches children's experience as they move through the school, not all of them are sure how to make full use of these resources.

The Values for Living programme is given an explicitly Christian interpretation. Pupils draw on their excellent knowledge of Bible stories that is gained from their RE lessons and time for worship. They have no hesitation in explaining an explicitly Christian understanding to each value and how this shapes their own behaviour. For example, they regard saying 'sorry' as 'just words, you have to do something to put things right so Jesus can wipe it out'. Parents of religious faiths other than Christianity actively seek places at the school. This is because the importance of faith is promoted, so all children feel welcome and able to talk openly about religious practice in their own lives. Excellent pastoral care is a key factor in why parents choose the school. At all times staff keep a close eye on pupils, tracking their academic progress and noting their responses in conversation so that support is given immediately when any concerns arise. This is particularly the case when pupils experience loss or grief and want to explore the deeper questions of life.

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

All groups involved in the school feel that worship is a vital part of each day and gives the school its defining Christian character. Pupils are always attentive in worship. Many stories leave a lasting impression on them such as the one involving very long chopsticks to explain co-operation. The planning of worship is thorough and involves the vicar and all staff. It includes a broad range of themes that cover the liturgical year and expand on the school's programme of values. As a result, pupils understand the Christian basis of values and gain a secure knowledge of Christian symbolism. They talk confidently, for example, about the meaning of baptism and later this term will be introduced to the Anglican form of the Eucharist.

Progress has been made in developing ways to monitor and evaluate worship since the last inspection. However, this does not take sufficient account of pupils' ideas about worship as a whole. Teachers regularly note their responses to individual acts of worship but this has not, for example, picked up their more general observations about the limited range of prayers or artefacts in use. Pupils understand the Anglican pattern of prayer in worship and talk confidently about asking for forgiveness, offering thanks and asking for help. Although they participate willingly, especially in church services, they are usually recipients of the worship programme. Given the level of their maturity, there are missed opportunities for them to play a more active and leading role in planning and preparing acts of worship.

The effectiveness of religious education is outstanding.

Pupils are enthusiastic about RE lessons. They make outstanding progress from generally low starting points in RE as a result of strong teaching. By the end of Y4 they are working at a level beyond what is expected for their age. All classes are taught by the headteacher and this ensures continuity in what pupils are learning. She is passionate about the subject, plans a rich programme for them and joined a national RE group on a visit to India in order to develop her own knowledge. The tour of different places of worship in the Queen's Park area of Bedford is a popular feature of the curriculum and creates very positive attitudes to other faith communities. Pupils are exceptionally knowledgeable for their age and this has been noted by their hosts who adjust the content for their visits accordingly.

The development point from the previous inspection, to involve pupils in assessing their work, has been addressed successfully. At the beginning of each topic pupils are involved in assessing what they already know. Their learning is then matched to the objectives for each lesson and they can see the progress they are making. Written marking challenges them to improve their understanding further by posing questions in response to what each child has written. For example, one pupil was asked to compare sad and joyful interpretations of paintings of the Easter story by different artists. Pupils take this feedback seriously and respond to these questions at the start of the next lesson.

RE makes a significant contribution to spiritual development. 'Godly Play' sessions, for example, led by a children's worker from a local church, ensure that even young children soon develop skills in reflection. They can identify the underlying message of stories and know that objects, such as a wooden carving of a shepherd, can carry a deeper meaning.

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

The school maximises its partnership with the Church locally and at Diocesan level. It works with leaders from other local Christian churches and faith communities so that children and adults gain the greatest possible benefit. Strategy days for staff and governors have involved workshops led by diocesan advisers and staff are encouraged to play an active role in diocesan training and initiatives. One teacher, for example, is following a programme for aspiring leaders of church schools. Members of the village community have noted significant changes since the arrival of the current headteacher. They regard the links as the strongest they have ever known and feel the school is now at the heart of the community. This is very clear to pupils, many of whom attend the lunchtime Christian club led by church members or the Junior Choir that meets in church after school.

Christian values have a high profile in the leadership and management of the school. The quality of relationships and school policies are constantly matched against these benchmarks. Governors are careful to make decisions in line with the Christian ethos to ensure that the needs of adults as well as children are fully met. The headteacher's clear vision drives improvement as a church school and governors rely on her to prioritise areas for improvement. They do, however, challenge as well as support development and take full ownership of strategic planning. The school knows itself well and accurately identifies its strengths and weaknesses. It is too cautious, however, in recognising its effectiveness because there is not enough rigour in matching its self-evaluation to criteria. The governors manage continuity of leadership extremely well. Positions in chairing the governing body and committees rotate in order to make the best use of experience and ensure succession. Governors are constantly on the watch for potential new recruits so that the excellent leadership of the school is sustained.