



Statutory Inspection of Anglican Schools Report

Ashton Church of England Voluntary Aided Middle School
High Street, Dunstable LU6 1NH



Diocese of St Albans

LA: Bedfordshire
SIAS Inspection: 22nd & 23rd September 2008
Previous S23 Inspection: March 2004
URN: 109714
Headteacher: Nicholas Sharpe
SIAS Inspector Name: Lyn Field
SIAS Inspector No: NS 151

School Context

This is a larger than average middle school with a stable staff team. It has a good reputation as a church school and takes pupils from a wide area. The majority of them are White British and the proportion with learning difficulties and disabilities is below average although the number with statements of special educational need is in line with schools nationally. The new headteacher took up post in January 2008.

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

This has traditionally been regarded as a strong church school and the atmosphere is one of honesty, generosity and welcome. The new headteacher is leading the school into a new era and has rightly recognised the need for a more analytical understanding of exactly how Christian values support the strong spiritual development of its pupils.

Established strengths

- The open and honest way in which pupils engage with religious and spiritual issues
- The value placed on worship and prayer in the life of the school
- The attention the staff give to the pastoral care of pupils

Focus for development

- To make full use of staffing resources to raise the achievement of more able pupils in religious education.
- To make use of feedback from all groups in setting priorities for improvement as a church school.

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

Pastoral care is a strength of the school. Senior pupils feel that it is the explicitly Christian interpretation of values that determines how everyone is treated. It highlights the respect and honesty that is expected in return. Relationships are good and the staff give generously of their time and effort in supporting individual pupils academically and in times of family crisis. In some RE lessons pupils keep personal diaries. The sensitivity of teachers in responding to these means that some pupils continue this practice long after they leave the class. This enables them to develop strategies for coping with issues in their personal lives. In response to this supportive culture pupils are keen to give of themselves and volunteer in high numbers for charity work and community events. The behaviour of some pupils in creating low level disruption in lessons remains a concern of pupils and staff. Changes in the way staff are deployed and the work of a learning mentor and Christian counsellor are beginning to make an impact in this area. Pupils report that circle time is highly effective in addressing issues that arise in school. They particularly note that where teachers insist on ground rules that respect confidentiality, pupils help each other to work out solutions to problems. It is clear that although guidelines for spiritual and moral development have yet to be shared with all staff and governors, pockets of excellent practice already exist. Displays make it clear that this is a church school but limited use is made of pupils' creative skills to express what this means in the life of the school.

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

Worship is allocated an important place in the timetable at both the beginning and end of every day. The school uses this effectively to affirm its core values but has not taken full advantage of this time to ensure everyone derives the maximum spiritual benefit. Pupils like the position of worship at the end of the day because they take time to reflect on the issues raised in lessons. It is clearly most effective when the senior staff or visitors leading worship actively engage pupils in questions that have relevance to their experiences. The emphasis on Christian values means pupils draw on religious language to express their feelings. In spite of the difficulties presented by the shape of the hall the staff successfully create a quiet atmosphere that pupils value for the sense of belonging it achieves. There are currently no processes in place to discover how adults and pupils feel they benefit from worship. Consequently, although leaders recognise the need to revitalise the environment for worship and set up the long planned worship committee, they have no information to guide them as to exactly where to make changes. For example, pupils value the reflective nature of worship and the prayers that start morning registration but feel they need more help in how to make use of silence and opportunities to lead worship themselves. Worship in the chapel is particularly popular because artwork and objects in the room create a special atmosphere and challenge pupils' spiritual thinking. Only a limited number of pupils can use this space on a regular basis and the elements that make this so successful, such as pupils' own paintings, have yet to be used in other areas of the school.

The effectiveness of the religious education is good.

Standards of teaching and learning are good overall but monitoring has not been sufficiently rigorous to address areas of inconsistency. The new co-ordinator has rightly made revisions to the syllabus so that the balance of teaching now pays proper attention to the understanding of world faiths and the relevance of religious beliefs in contemporary society. When pupils enter the school their attainment in RE is broadly average, reflecting their varied experiences in previous schools. Teachers are passionate about their subject and this motivates and engages pupils. As a result they work hard to reach standards that are above average although few pupils achieve the highest levels. This is because there are significant variations in the quality of teaching. In the best lessons, which are sometimes outstanding, resources are well matched to the maturity and interests of pupils. The tasks they are set challenge their spiritual as well as their religious understanding, as in a Year 5 lesson where pebbles and water were used to explore the meaning of baptism. Pupils make less progress where expectations are low and activities demand too little of them. The analysis of data is beginning to raise questions where inconsistencies appear in how well different groups achieve. At present, the lesson observations do not focus sharply enough on how well teaching affects learning to explain these variations. RE is one of several subjects identified for a valuable pilot project using extra teaching support in lessons. The department has yet to decide how to make optimum use of this in raising standards.

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

The Christian ethos is deeply embedded in the school through the quality of relationships, the regular presence of local clergy and the broad pattern of worship. This has been sustained through a period of change and pupils recognise this as a strength of the school. The arrival of the new headteacher has prompted a sharper focus on how Christian values are communicated and made relevant to pupils. It is clear that the senior staff provide strong support in ensuring that new systems in place work effectively and are focused on the achievement and wellbeing of pupils. The shared commitment of all staff to the Christian ethos is evident in the manner in which they undertake their pastoral and professional roles. The process of appointing the new headteacher heightened governors' awareness of their specific responsibilities in a church school. They already play an active role in committees and call the school to account where policies do not adequately reflect the Christian values of the school. Religious education and collective worship are given priority in the organisation of the curriculum but the evaluation of this focuses on what the school provides rather than its impact on pupils. The Rector of Dunstable, as a foundation governor, is well informed about these areas and has insight into where the school's strengths and areas for development lie. Other governors, however, rely too heavily on his input because systems are not in place to draw together the views of all groups in shaping a strategic plan for the school as a church school.