



Statutory Inspection of Anglican Schools Report



St Andrew's Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School
Benslow Lane, Hitchin SG4 9RD

Diocese of St Albans

LA: Hertfordshire
SIAS Inspection: 5th May 2009
Previous S23 Inspection: March 2006
URN: 117467
Headteacher: Christine Cernik
SIAS Inspector Name: Lyn Field
SIAS Inspector No: 151

School Context

As the only Church of England school in the town, St Andrew's takes some pupils from outside its immediate locality. Overall, they come from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds, with around 20% representing minority ethnic groups. Many start school with abilities that are lower than those expected for their age although only a few are at the early stages of learning to speak English. The proportion with learning difficulties and disabilities is broadly average.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Andrew's as a Church of England school are outstanding.

This is a truly inclusive school where children are nurtured in their faith. Excellent care and teaching enables them to flourish in their learning and personal development. The headteacher's enthusiasm and constant drive for improvement is shared by staff and governors so pupils benefit from innovative projects. They grow into responsible young people, well equipped to make a significant contribution to today's diverse society.

Established strengths

- The strong leadership given by the headteacher and chair of governors
- The enthusiasm and team spirit of the staff that creates positive attitudes in pupils
- Pupils' confidence in talking about faith and religious ideas
- The focus on spiritual development in curriculum planning

Focus for development

- To make use of the school's strengths in creative activities to learn more about the impact of worship on the community.

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

This is a highly inclusive school that nurtures children of all religions in their faith. The trust and openness that is characteristic of all relationships enables pupils to talk confidently about their own religious beliefs and personal identity. A typical comment is 'I am special because I am different to everyone else in my class'. The importance of faith is a thread that runs through the whole curriculum. Pupils learn its relevance to everyday life because they take part in practical activities that help them to understand how beliefs are expressed in simple rituals. The Reception class is an outstanding example of how the spiritual awareness of young children can be developed. Wood sculptures, built to hold cocoons as an expression of new life, friendship chains and weekly meditations are just a few examples of the richness they experience. This continues through all year groups and the school is one of the few that have clear evidence for how pupils make exceptional progress in their spiritual development. For example, Reception children write 'big questions' about God and by Year 6, they express their own abstract ideas in 'Who is God?' poems. Around every corner there are displays that support and challenge children in their personal development. The staff are excellent models of Christian values in their team work and the generous nature of the care they provide. Pupils follow their example and look after each other. They feel secure in tackling challenging tasks and consistently achieve high standards.

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

Worship holds a key place in the life of the school. It is meaningful to all groups of children because an excellent balance is achieved between public worship for the whole community and opportunities for more personal prayer and reflection in classes. Worship as a whole school highlights festivals in the church year. These are planned creatively and leave a lasting impression on pupils, particularly the carol service in church and the celebration of Ascension day in the school grounds. Technology is increasingly being used to give pupils a sense of belonging to a larger community. For example, images on the current theme are projected as they enter the hall and there is a direct link with events at the Cenotaph for the two minutes silence on Remembrance Day. The inclusive nature of the school is equally evident in worship. Children of all faith traditions feel welcome and families willingly share their beliefs and prayers. Class worship is especially popular with pupils. They feel supported in their own spiritual journeys because the staff are skilful in creating an atmosphere where pupils can attempt to explain their own ideas about God. Pupils are confident to offer spontaneous prayers and use time for quiet reflection to ponder special memories or difficulties in their own lives. The school monitors what pupils and parents think about the organisation of worship and make changes in response to this. However, this does not delve deeply enough into exactly how much pupils benefit spiritually and so the strength of worship in the school is not always recognised.

The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding.

Pupils reach standards in RE that are well above average. The rapid progress they make in the foundation stage is built on year by year. By Year 6, their achievement is outstanding and they have developed highly reflective skills and can tackle challenging tasks such as identifying Jesus' legacy to the world. This is because lessons consistently focus on the implications of religious teaching for contemporary society. Pupils make links, for example, between Christian teaching and the arguments to prohibit slavery and racial prejudice and correctly recognise the key beliefs that underpin the story of the Prodigal Son. The co-ordinator has an accurate understanding of how standards have improved, the strengths of teaching and the impact of staff training in creative RE. This is not always evident in the monitoring of lessons which sometimes lacks a clear evaluative focus and is too descriptive of what is being taught. Teachers make excellent use of activities such as mind-mapping and talking partners to ensure that new learning is secure. Tasks are well planned to meet the needs of different abilities so all pupils are able to make good progress. Teaching in RE encourages very positive attitudes to other faiths and a whole school visit to the Gurdwara brought an enthusiastic response from adults and children alike. Pupils regard RE as essential to the curriculum because they feel they have a responsibility to be informed about other religions that are part of Britain today.

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

The headteacher and the chair of governors are deeply committed to the school as an inclusive church school. Any decisions made by governors take account of this so that the Christian ethos remains central to the life of the school. This is evident in the priorities for the development of the new building and the use of the grounds. When staff are appointed, care is taken to ensure that they are able to contribute to the ethos of the school. As a result, they ensure that partnerships with both Anglican and Baptist churches and other faith groups are of maximum benefit to children. The new vicar already has a good understanding of how links with the church might develop further. The drive for constant improvement is led by the headteacher and strongly supported by senior leaders. They know the school well and make effective choices in selecting training for staff and governors. These choices show insight into which areas need revisiting and where innovation can build on existing strengths. The school has continued to improve since the last inspection and has linked up with other church schools to develop a more creative approach to the teaching of RE. The school's self-evaluation is accurate and recognises its distinctive strengths in its partnerships with faith groups and the way that art projects add a spiritual dimension to the environment. There are clearly strategies in place to ensure the inclusive Christian ethos of the school is secured for the future. This distinctive character is made clear to parents who are highly appreciative of the impact that Christian values have on the development of their children.