



National Society Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools Report

St John's Church of England Academy

Fenby Avenue
Lascelles Park
Darlington
DL1 4UB

Diocese: Durham

Local authority: Darlington
Dates of inspection: 10 July 2013
Date of last inspection: 3 April 2008
School's unique reference number: 841/3306
Headteacher: Miss Christine Large
Inspector's name and number: Mr Brian Hedley 619

School context

This 200 pupil Academy (2012 converter) is situated in an area on the outskirts of Darlington. There is a high level of social disadvantage. The school holds a number of awards including: Basic Skills Award, Activemark, Healthy Schools Award, School Achievement Award, and an Inclusive School Award from Darlington Council.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Johns' Academy as a Church of England school are outstanding

Christian values are at the heart of school life and as a result, relationships at all levels are exceptional. Children make excellent progress because teachers and governors take time to assess their changing needs and adapt learning and care in a way that ensures success. This has a significant impact on pupils, enabling them to become confident, compassionate learners.

Established strengths

- Christian core values pervade every aspect of school life – high expectations for all
- Outstanding commitment towards human flourishing
- Improved robust self-evaluation which drives continuous improvement
- High quality Collective Worship and RE which impacts positively on pupils' spiritual growth and development

Focus for development

- Involve invited guests more during Family Worship
- Root whole-school policies more explicitly in core values

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

Embedded Christian values at the heart of this school form the bedrock that shapes learning and development, leading to highly positive, strong relationships at all levels. Parents and carers spoke warmly and enthusiastically of the school's ability to continually raise standards whilst cherishing

and nurturing every child. They confirmed that children are well motivated and make excellent progress; this belief is supported by school data showing the sustained achievement of pupils over a number of years now, and by the response of one pupil, who, when asked what motivates them, said, 'Being cared for and loved'.

Parents and grandparents said that, 'There is all-embracing love here; staff have time for everyone - not just the children; problems are shared and solutions found'. In testament to this, a father spoke profoundly of the help and compassion he and his daughters had received from staff during his wife's serious illness. Another spoke confidently about the impact the Christian ethos has had on her non-church family, special reference being made to the way in which values have spilled out into her home and stayed with her teenage son as he makes his way in life. A Sikh mother said how wonderful it was that her faith is respected; her child in Reception class wrote that, 'In my Sikh religion the Sikh Gurus are my foundation like Jesus is for Christians.'

Behaviour around the school is exemplary in almost all cases. Children described how they learn to be respectful to all-comers. The impact of this is that discrimination is non-existent; children are tolerant and value diversity. Equal opportunities are embedded in every aspect of school life and as a result, all groups achieve well. One pupil explained that, 'If you don't care for each other properly you're not a good person so you can't say you're a Christian', and another said that, 'Jesus is important here', and another, 'We forgive'. When asked what made him most proud, a Year 6 boy explained, 'Us older ones help the little ones to use more Christian values around school by showing them how to.' A further measure of core values influencing the attitudes of pupils and their families is that this small school has collected over £2000 for a variety of local, regional and global charities this year.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Children in nursery and reception get off to an excellent start. In other year groups pupils learn about the content of RE alongside their skill development. This plays a significant role in promoting citizenship because there are opportunities for them to think about issues such as resolving conflict, exploring rights and responsibilities, and above all, encouraging them to justify and defend their personal opinions about the things which really matter to them.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

Worship is meticulously planned, delivered, monitored and evaluated. It has high priority in the daily life of the school and reinforces Christian distinctiveness and core values; pupils receive 'Shining Light' awards for demonstrating them. Following an agreement of themes between the Headteacher, Incumbent and whole community, there is an emphasis on Christianity, arranged in a way that gives pupils an understanding of God the Father, the person of Jesus as the light of the world, and the Holy Spirit as our helper. Worship is inclusive; no-one is withdrawn. Feedback about the worship programme is used to refine provision. For example, following comments from pupils, the timing of it was moved to the beginning of each day. Pupils talked openly about how the Anglican 'props' in worship help them focus and reflect. Special mention was made of the worship table, prayer tree and post box, candle, hymns, songs and quiet times, all of which help them engage in reflection and personal prayer.

The class-led Y5 worship observed was attended by over twenty-five community members including parents, grandparents, and an older sister. It explored the theme of Fairtrade as a 'type of change' and was exceptional as an act of worship because it gathered the community together not only to celebrate but to share, think, listen, pray and reflect. However, opportunities were missed to actively engage visiting adults more fully; for example, the version of the Lord's Prayer used by pupils could have been provided, or an invitation for a community member to light the candle to mark the start of worship. This is something that could easily be rectified. After worship, community members expressed their joy and appreciation for the opportunity to share this special time together. Some spoke of it being an uplifting time and others about occasions when they have been supported through rough times such as bereavement and illness.

The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding

The Co-ordinator is passionate about linking the subject effectively with the core values of the school whilst making sure it pervades Collective Worship and other curriculum areas. She is unrelenting in her efforts to secure high-quality RE. As a measure of this commitment, she has introduced much improved planning, assessment and tracking mechanisms. These, together with a portfolio of annotated and levelled work, confirm excellent progress relative to starting points, and have identified the need to develop even more challenging work for higher attainers. Rigorous evaluation by staff and governors results in effective provision and use of appropriate resources.

Most teachers have excellent subject knowledge and an ability to teach religious education (RE) with confidence. They are able to offer pupils choice, independence and engagement in classroom activities. They have high expectations, and as a result pupils' skills develop quickly and move them on to next steps in their learning; this results in high levels of motivation. The classroom support observed was exceptional; teaching assistants enabled even the most challenging pupils to access learning appropriate to their needs because they used positive language that motivated and engaged pupils. Creative, challenging approaches to RE together with skilful questioning ensures that pupils increasingly understand the characteristics of each religion and the similarities and differences between them.

Work scrutiny on inspection day confirmed skills progression in investigation, interpretation, reflection and empathy. In lesson observations there was plentiful evidence to show how RE is encouraging pupils to develop positive attitudes to their learning and towards the beliefs and values of others. Of special note were: a Godly Play lesson (Reception), 'Rites of Passage' (Y5), and 'Pilgrimage' (Y6). Each contained elements of self-awareness, respect, open-mindedness, some deep and profound thinking, awe and wonder, and every lesson had planned time for reflection.

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

Senior leaders drive improvement at every level. They are excellent role models because of their highly positive attitudes, team working and good levels of expertise. The Headteacher has fostered a nurturing ethos, not just for pupils, but for staff and community, too. Because the school's Christian vision is lived out in reality day by day, levels of achievement, positive attitudes and behaviour from all make this a special place where love, respect, tolerance and compassion create a harmonious and generous community,

Governors support and encourage the leadership team. They are effective in their role because they monitor the impact of their policies in a variety of ways, for example visits, work scrutiny, talking to pupils, parents and staff, sending out questionnaires, and receiving presentations and reports from teaching colleagues. This means that they are well-informed and have a clear view of the strengths of the school and issues that need to be addressed. In relation to Church school distinctiveness, governors could challenge and support the leadership team even more strongly if, as whole-school policies are reviewed, more explicit use is made of helpful evaluation material such as that to be found on the Christian Values for Schools website.

The links between the school, the local church community and Diocese are strong. The former incumbent from St John's Church was praised by many pupils, parents and staff for the significant contribution he made to community life over ten years, especially, but not exclusively at times of crisis, and also for his contribution to thought-provoking worship. The newly appointed incumbent is already making links with the school and, together with the Foundation Governors is demonstrating a strong commitment to meaningful and effective partnership.

SIAMS report, July 2013, St John's Academy, Darlington, DLI 4UB