

Catholic Diocese of Northampton



Inspection Report of Denominational Character and Religious Education (Under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005)

St Thomas Aquinas Catholic Primary School

St Mary's Avenue, Bletchley, Milton Keynes, MK3 5DT

DfE School No: 8263369

URN: 110476

Executive Headteacher: Mr Robert Mundy

Chair of Governors Mrs Catherine Stormonth

Reporting Inspector: Mrs Jane Crow

Associate Inspector: Mrs Maggie Stacey

Date of Inspection: 01 July 2019

Date of Issue: 24 July 2019

Date previous Inspection: April 2014

The School is in the Trusteeship of the Diocese and in partnership with the Bletchley Catholic Schools' Federation and Milton Keynes Local Authority.

Description of the school

St Thomas Aquinas is a voluntary aided Catholic primary school which is federated with Bishop Parker Catholic Primary and led by an executive headteacher. 50% of teaching staff are Catholic and almost all were not employed in this school at the time of the last inspection. Five of the staff are newly qualified teachers. There are 300 pupils on roll in the age range of 4-11 years, 88% of whom are Catholic. The percentage who speak English as an additional language is 30.7%, which is significantly above the national average. However, the proportion of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and the percentage of pupils who qualify for pupil premium funding are below average.

Overall effectiveness of this Catholic school

Grade 1

St Thomas Aquinas is an outstanding Catholic school which is thriving because of strong leadership, excellent teaching and very positive relationships between staff and pupils. The distinctive Catholic nature is highly visible in these relationships and is given a high profile in every aspect of daily life. As a result, pupils are reflective, religiously literate and have a strong affinity to their Catholic community. They relish the opportunity to debate and deliberate challenging theological questions and are eager to support those less fortunate than themselves through charitable fundraising.

Pupils and staff are rightly proud of their school and enjoy belonging to a community where they feel valued and cared for. Pupil behaviour at St Thomas Aquinas is exemplary and parents express extreme satisfaction with the ethos, academic standards and rapport with staff. Governors are regular visitors and fully involved in the life of the school, discharging their responsibilities very effectively.

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

Grade 1

The headteacher, senior staff and governors are all highly motivated advocates for Catholic education and have maintained the very high standards achieved at the time of the last S48 inspection. Self-evaluation is embedded in the management structure of the school and is thorough and accurate.

Leaders run a very successful induction programme for inexperienced teachers and those without specialist RE knowledge, ensuring that the school's ability to attain high quality pupil outcomes is sustainable long term. There is a strong capacity for the current leadership to maintain the school's outstanding effectiveness.

What the school needs to do to improve further

- To enhance progress for older pupils by providing more opportunities to write extended, unscaffolded answers and develop skills they will require when transitioning to the secondary curriculum
- To ensure that the governing body are able to effectively monitor achievement in RE and its comparability to other core curriculum subjects by presenting RE assessment data at least termly
- To enhance the impact of support by teaching assistants in RE lessons through more effective planning and liaison by teachers

Catholic Life

Grade 1

The Catholic life of the school is outstanding because leaders at all levels are deeply committed to the Church's mission in education and make it their number one priority. Staff are excellent role models, totally committed to supporting and promoting the Catholic traditions. Pupils say they love coming to school because it is a Catholic school and talk enthusiastically about how they benefit from the school's chaplaincy provision, which is extensive and includes a very popular and successful retreat programme. The chaplaincy team is well supported by leaders and includes the parish priest (who is the RE link governor), RE Lead, Special Educational Needs coordinator and staff at all levels. They share a strong belief that chaplaincy provision in Catholic schools should cross over seamlessly with

provision in the parishes and this can be seen in the work of the Mini Vinnies group which raises money for food banks and the homeless.

Pupils have a very clear understanding of the school's mission statement which is prominently displayed around the school. They are proud to explain how values that stem from their mission statement impact on their attitudes and behaviour, which is exemplary. Relationships between pupils reflect true Christian respect and concern for others and underpins a learning environment which is safe and secure. It is evident in the role of Playground Buddies who ensure inclusion and protection from any bullying behaviour. It also key to the school's approach towards vulnerable pupils such as those with special educational needs.

Governors and the parish priest make a highly significant contribution to ensuring that a strong Catholic identity permeates the school's daily life. In partnership with the headteacher and senior leaders, they ensure that pupils have access to a wide range of experiences which develop them spiritually alongside the school's drive for them to achieve academic excellence. They and the pupils are fully involved in systems that evaluate the strengths and areas of development within the school and guarantee that improving provision for Catholic Life is always a key priority for whole school development planning. The RE self-evaluation document is an accurate and comprehensive reflection of the impact of leaders on school improvement.

The response to the parental questionnaire was overwhelmingly positive, indicating that parents hold the school in very high esteem. Almost all of the responses say that they send their children to St Thomas Aquinas because of faith development, high standards and high-quality pastoral support. A typical quote from parents was, *"Great teachers, great teaching methods and above all, great Catholic Christian values"*. Relationship and Sex Education is a concern for a small minority of parents, but the school has adopted the Journey in Love programme which fully promotes Catholic teaching and reflects both the CES model and diocesan advice.

Religious Education

Grade 1

The quality of religious education is outstanding. Scrutiny of books and information from lesson observations indicates that attainment and the quality of work produced is extremely high. Pupils make at least good progress because their teachers respond to information about their prior attainment in planning and cater for the differing needs of individuals and vulnerable groups. However, in some lessons the impact of teaching assistant support could be enhanced further by more effective planning.

Pupils are extremely proud of their work in RE and the presentation of this work indicates very high expectations by staff across the school. However, progress could be further enhanced for older pupils if there were more opportunities to write extended, un-scaffolded answers giving them the opportunity to develop skills required as they move into the secondary curriculum.

Teachers have good subject knowledge which allows them to teach interesting and well sequenced lessons and ensures that new information is embedded in the pupils' long-term memory. New staff and those for whom RE is not a specialism benefit from a strong induction programme and the support of an experienced and dedicated RE lead. Her mentoring support for non-specialist staff has guaranteed that the teaching seen was at least good and some was outstanding. The induction programme for newly qualified teachers has concentrated on the development of questioning skills to good effect. This came through as a clear strength in lesson observations where teachers used challenging texts and posed thought-provoking questions. The quality of the pupils' responses indicates a very high level of religious literacy. In Key Stage 2 the majority can back up their opinions with biblical references and in Year 1 children's responses to the question, *"How to be a good neighbour"* indicated that they are being taught to make clear links from scripture to their everyday life.

Pupils enjoy religious education lessons and appreciate opportunities to share their own ideas and opinions with others. Across the school attitudes to learning are very positive and as a result, pupils are developing a very good knowledge of the Catholic faith. The subject leader has worked with the Northampton Diocesan Office to trial and implement new assessment strategies and she monitors the accuracy and consistency of teacher assessments. Assessment for learning in lessons is strong but

less obvious in books. The curriculum meets the Bishops' Conference requirements and is appropriate for the needs of all pupils. Quality is good and well planned to draw on experiences within and outside of school. It makes a strong contribution to pupils' spiritual and moral development. Pupils' books evidence good coverage of the curriculum and leaders ensure that RE is given at least parity with other core subjects. However, the governing body need to receive RE assessment data at least termly.

Collective Worship

Grade 1

Worship and prayer are central to school life for both pupils and staff and this is evidenced by the level of resourcing and training that are in place to ensure that collective worship is of a very good quality. The school has recently completed the building of a chapel space which includes high quality artefacts and is greatly appreciated by pupils. There are also two inspirational courtyard prayer spaces that are regularly used for personal reflection and prayer.

Leaders give regular professional development of all staff a high priority. The executive deputy headteacher has an MA in Catholic Leadership; the RE lead has completed a Catholic leadership course and teachers complete the CCRS in their own time. Consequently, leaders have an extensive understanding of the liturgical year, feasts and sacraments and there is a wide range of prayer opportunities linking to Catholic tradition in place. A plan for celebrating the liturgical year is presented in advance and includes Eucharistic Adoration, Advent Liturgy, Distribution of Ashes, Reconciliation services and regular prayer groups such as Rosary Club. Catholic pupils and those of other faiths are at ease praying together and engage enthusiastically in their assemblies, which are well planned and effective in getting across their point. The quality of children's singing greatly enhances these events. Children regularly volunteer to read, serve, sing and play instruments during school Masses and many children are altar servers within the parish.

All upper Key Stage 2 pupils are expected to organise and lead a class reflection based on the Gather, Reflect, Respond and Go Forth format. A Year 5 group were observed leading one on climate change that was a moving and spiritual experience for their peers. A pupil with special educational needs who regularly attends a Rosary group explained that he liked to start his morning this way as it gave him time to think about God. Priests from the local parish serve the school very well, celebrating Masses in school each term as well as welcoming Key Stage 2 pupils to the church for Mass and Adoration.

The inspectors wish to thank all staff and children for their very warm welcome and for contributing to their informative and interesting visit.