

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SCHOOL

St Bede's, Blackburn is a voluntary aided Roman Catholic comprehensive school and Specialist Sports College for boys and girls aged 11 to 16 within the Blackburn with Darwen Local Authority. The school serves 5 designated contributory primary schools from the parishes of St John Vianney, St Peter, St Edward, St Joseph, Sacred Heart and Pleasington Priory. With 1022 pupils on roll it is broadly average in size. 1014 pupils are baptised Catholics. The school's indicative admission number is 190 and it is heavily oversubscribed year on year. The number of pupils identified as having special educational needs is 196 which is broadly average. 26 of these have a statutory statement of special educational need which is also broadly average. The pupil population is almost entirely of white British heritage and represents the full range of socio-economic backgrounds within a catchment area of overall relative deprivation. 45 of the school's 72 teachers (63%) are Catholics.

OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SCHOOL

St Bede's is a good and improving Catholic school, which has successfully emerged from a period of difficulty largely resulting from turbulence in staffing within the Religious Education department which has also had an impact on some general aspects of the Catholic life of the school. This has been managed well by the headteacher and senior managers, not least in the way in which they have taken some responsibility for teaching Religious Education themselves. Judicious appointments of specialist teachers and a well-qualified subject manager, supported by serious investment in resources and training have not only largely resolved the staffing situation but have led to an upward turn in examination results and standards and achievement throughout the school. At the same time there has been a reinvigoration of provision for the Catholic life of the school exemplified by the improved provision for daily collective worship. However, there is still scope to make daily prayer more immediately relevant to pupils' lives. Alongside these developments relatively small but significant groups of enthusiastic pupils, led by committed teachers, have been providing a focus for practical action on behalf of the disadvantaged. This is in addition to the pupils' traditional support for causes such as CAFOD. A more recently established group is contributing towards improving the quality of the liturgical life of the school. These features, together with a well-deserved reputation for looking after the needs of the more vulnerable members of the community such as those with learning difficulties or disabilities and those at risk of exclusion, mean that St Bede's is living out well its mission as a Catholic school in "following the teaching and example of Jesus Christ".

Improvement since the last inspection

In relation to issues brought to the school's attention at the time of the previous Section 23 inspection more effective strategies for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning have been devised and implemented. This has led to improved standards. Subject accommodation has improved within the tight situation prevailing in the school generally and further planned improvements through the school building programme are already well in hand. However, school managers and governors have reviewed the allocation of teaching time for Religious Education in Years 7 to 9 and, after due consideration, have decided to not to increase it. It remains, therefore, slightly below that required by the Bishops of England and Wales. Taking into account progress on these issues and the impact of other advances made since the previous inspection improvement overall is good.

Capacity to improve

The school's self-evaluation is largely accurate and leads to effective strategic planning for improving both the Catholic life of the school and curriculum Religious Education. Following a dip standards and achievement in curriculum Religious Education have improved significantly because effective action has been taken. The school is therefore well placed to continue to improve.

What the school should do to improve further

- Continue to devise and implement means of monitoring and evaluating the Catholic nature of the school, particularly in the light of recent developments, and ensure that governors are involved in the process.
- Continue to provide pupils with more opportunities to make prayer more relevant to their daily lives.
- Keep under review the time allocation for curriculum Religious Education in Years 7 to 9.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT OF THE CATHOLIC LIFE OF THE SCHOOL

Inspection evidence supports the school's view that the leadership and management of the Catholic life of the school are good. The strong leadership of the headteacher ensures that the vision which is clearly articulated in the school's Mission Statement is translated into the everyday life of the school. It is recognised, accepted and appreciated by all members of the school community. The deputy and other members of the senior leadership team ably support the headteacher in this. The importance of the school's Catholic character is also reflected in the status recently given to the leadership of the Religious Education department. Resources are made available to ensure that an appropriate programme of in-service training is also provided to support teachers' understanding and appreciation of the part they play in supporting the Catholic life of the school. The inclusive nature of the school based on Gospel values and a culture of reconciliation and concern for all is evident in the way the school deals with the most vulnerable members of its community. The work of relatively recently established groups such as "Amnesty" or "Fair Trade", although not specifically Catholic, does allow the pupils concerned to channel their enthusiasm to help others in ways which accord with Catholic social teaching. These complement the school's traditional substantial commitment to charitable activity, for example through support for CAFOD. Pupils appreciate the opportunities provided by the recent re-introduction of residential retreat experiences. Governors are well informed and committed supporters of the school. In what is clearly an improving situation the school should continue to devise and implement means of monitoring and evaluating its Catholic life, particularly in the light of recent developments, and to ensure the governors are involved in the process.

THE QUALITY OF COLLECTIVE WORSHIP

The school is accurate in its judgement that provision for collective worship is good. A very strong feature of the inspection evidence is the way in which the school's well-devised policy and procedures for collective worship are translated effectively into daily practice. This reflects the positive impact of those responsible for school liturgy. The recent creation of a pupil "liturgy group" is also having a positive effect on the quality of collective worship and helping to raise the profile of worship in the eyes of pupils. Teachers, including crucially those new to the school or who are not themselves Catholics, feel well supported by both by the availability of written resources and the help available from the Religious Education department. Pupils respond well to the expectation that they too have to accept some responsibility for the prayer life of their form or year group. As a result form prayer appears natural and not forced although lacking some of the spontaneity and real sense of ownership which appears when pupils are used to presenting their own petitions. The school is now encouraged to provide pupils with more opportunities to make prayer more relevant to their daily lives. There is a regular moment for prayer at the staff briefings led by the headteacher and teachers get together more informally from time to time as the occasion arises. For example the inspection took place during "Fair Trade Week" and on the Monday morning a small group of teachers shared a moving, simple but very well produced service in the school chapel which set the tone for the week's theme. Assemblies are well planned with careful attention to the setting and atmosphere demanded by these occasions and provide good opportunities for the active involvement of pupils.

ACHIEVEMENT AND STANDARDS IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Inspection evidence endorses the school's view that standards and achievement are good. Increasing stability within the Religious Education department and the impact of more specialist teaching has contributed to a rapidly improving situation where practically all pupils are entered for the GCSE examination in Religious Studies. Creditably the overwhelming majority obtain at least a pass grade. In 2006 results in the A*-C range were below national averages but confirm an improving trend over the last few years. More pupils obtained the highest A*-A grades than in most other subjects. The school's own assessment information for pupils currently in Year 11 indicates that standards are now above average and compare well with those reached in other core subjects. Improved assessment procedures in Years 7 to 9 mean that the school now has more reliable information on the progress made by pupils. Inspection evidence gathered from lesson observations and scrutiny of pupils' work confirms the school's view that in Year 9 standards are above average and pupils achieve well. Pupils build on a very solid grounding provided in Year 7 so that by Year 9 they are confidently applying more advanced skills, for example in evaluating such propositions that "turning the other cheek is an impossible teaching in today's world". Pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities make broadly similar progress to other pupils because their needs are accurately identified and well catered for.

THE QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The school believes that teaching and learning in Religious Education is good. Inspection evidence from lessons observed and an analysis of pupils' work confirms this evaluation. Teaching and learning in the 6 lessons observed was good overall and ranged from outstanding to satisfactory. Teachers are able to capitalise on the good relations evident in classrooms supported not least by the good attitudes to learning and good behaviour exhibited by pupils. This is particularly so when lessons are made interesting and challenging with activities well matched to pupils' capabilities. Conversely, in otherwise satisfactory lessons where these features are not as strong, the pace of learning is less rapid and sometimes leads to restlessness in the pupils. Learning contributes well to pupils' overall personal development where teachers seize opportunities to enable pupils to reflect on the issues which are being studied and make them relevant to their own life experiences. Digital technology is used effectively to provide interesting resources which make lessons stimulating, for example recordings of the Washington speech made by Martin Luther King. Assessment procedures are developing well. Pupils' starting points are now more accurately measured which enables realistic targets to be set and progress towards them tracked through attainment levels. Pupils themselves appreciate the fact that the level of challenge in Religious Education lessons has improved over the last couple of years. They now feel better informed about the progress they make and have a better understanding of what they need to do to improve.

THE QUALITY OF THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CURRICULUM

The quality of the curriculum for Religious Education is good. It has recently improved and is contributing, therefore, to better achievement in the subject as well as having a more positive effect on pupils' personal development. Subject specification change for the GCSE course has made learning more relevant to pupils needs and so encourages interest and commitment to learning. Schemes of work in Years 7 to 9 which now better meet the requirements of the Bishops of England and Wales have been reworked. They are still in the process of being fine tuned so that they make learning more relevant to pupils' lives particularly by ensuring that gains in knowledge and understanding of Catholic belief and practice are matched by opportunities to consider the implications this has for the daily life of a Catholic in today's world. The curriculum across Year 7 to 11 is also enhanced by units of work and enrichment activities which help prepare pupils for life in a multicultural society. As noted earlier the time allocation for curriculum Religious Education in Year 7 to 9 remains below the 10% required by the Bishops of England and Wales. The governors should continue to keep this under review.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT OF CURRICULUM RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Inspection evidence indicates that the leadership and management of Religious Education in the school are good with some outstanding features. On appointment in 2004 the subject manager vigorously evaluated the quality and effectiveness of the provision and, strongly supported by the school's senior management, created a comprehensive action plan which has led to all round improvements. With a more appropriate curriculum in place teaching and learning were rightly identified as a key area for improvement. More specialist teachers are now in post with others already appointed for the next academic year. The department will shortly be housed in newly built suited accommodation. The centrality of Religious Education to the life of the school is strongly evident in the priority given to ensuring that it receives its share of what are relatively tight financial resources available to the school. Well targeted in-service training supported by expertise from the school's own resources as well as the use of a specialist consultancy from elsewhere have been effective in improving the quality of teaching and learning. The impact of these changes can now be seen clearly in improving standards and achievement and leave the subject very well placed to continue to improve further. The effectiveness of the department also benefits from the school's good procedures for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning and accountability for subject performance.