

Catholic Diocese of Northampton



**INSPECTION REPORT OF DENOMINATIONAL
CHARACTER AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

(Under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005)

**ST MARY'S VOLUNTARY AIDED
CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL**

Main Street, Aston-le-Walls, NN11 6UF

DCSF School No 928/3400
URN: 122040

Head Teacher: Mrs J Hamilton
Chair of Governors: Mrs D Thorneycroft

Reporting Inspector: Mr B O'Byrne
Associate Inspector: Mrs K Mustow

Date of Inspection: 9th July 2009
Date Report Issued: 22nd July 2009

Date of previous Inspection: 9th September 2006

The School is in the Trusteeship of the Diocese and in partnership with Northamptonshire
Local Authority

Description of School

St Mary's Primary School is the oldest primary school in the diocese and has been serving the children of the area since 1832. It currently has 95 children on roll, 77% of whom are Catholic. A coach brings 18 children daily from Daventry, situated 10 miles away. Due to the nature of the area most children are from indigenous families. There are three children who speak English as an additional language.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1: Outstanding; Grade 2: Good; Grade 3: Satisfactory; Grade 4: Unsatisfactory

Overall effectiveness of this Catholic school

Grade 2

St Mary's is a very good school with some outstanding features. The school makes very good provision for prayer, worship and religious education [RE]. Standards are high and pupils make good progress from year to year. Inspectors judged teaching to be good overall. RE is at the heart of the curriculum and is well planned and carefully monitored. The behaviour of the children is excellent. Parents are unanimous in their praise of the school. All parents questioned agree or agree very strongly that they would be happy to recommend the school to others. Spiritual, moral and social and cultural development is very well addressed through RE with contributions from other curriculum areas. This permeates the wider life of the school. The headteacher shows very good leadership of the school and is strongly supported by the staff and governors. Pupils, staff and parents are, rightly, very proud of their school. The children are happy to attend and feel valued and secure and participate well in the life of the school through the school council. The school has the feeling of a well ordered, happy, extended family. However, part of the governors' work is unsatisfactory.

Improvements required from the last inspection

Grade 2

The school has addressed all issues from the last inspection. Many innovations have taken place, including the provision of an indoor and an outdoor area for prayer and reflection. The outside area is beautiful and a wonderful resource for the children. Thanks to the efforts of around fifty parents, pupils and governors, the school has provided the children with well cared for allotments producing a range of vegetables and fruit. This has enabled the children to learn about self-sufficiency and the miracle of growth in God's wonderful world.

The capacity of the school community to improve and develop

Grade 2

The school has a very good capacity to continue improving. The headteacher and staff are committed and hard working. The governors make a substantial impact on the life and work of the school through frequent involvement and daily visits from the chair.

What the school should do to improve further:

- School governors should work within the mandate of diocesan education policy and the wishes of the Bishop and bring the school into compliance with the school's Instrument of Government as soon as is reasonably practical.
- The governors should develop strategies to improve the percentage of Catholic teachers which has fallen to 33%.
- Continue to develop the school's assessment procedures in RE.

Leadership and Management

Grade 2

Many aspects of the leadership and management of the Catholic life of St Mary's are good. There is a clear direction set for the school which is increasingly improving both in its temporal and spiritual life. The headteacher is totally committed to the school and is a highly effective leader. She is strongly supported by her staff and the school governing body. She demonstrates her commitment to the religious foundation of the school in many ways including completing a module of the Catholic Certificate of Religious Studies.

Governance

Grade 4

Despite their many strengths and considerable dedication to the St Mary's community, the management of the school by the governors is in one crucial respect unsatisfactory. Contrary to national guidelines and a directive from the Bishop and his representatives, the governing body has contravened the school's Instrument of Government by not appointing a practising Catholic headteacher.

The Prayer Life of the School

Grade 2

Pupils are provided with very many opportunities to develop in the understanding and growth of their faith. Prayer and worship are integral to the life of the school and pupils are given time for meditation, spontaneous prayer and reflection. The school's mission statement is known and understood by all the children and is prominently displayed throughout the school. The beautiful recently installed prayer areas are well used by pupils, staff and governors. Policies for prayer and liturgy form part of the religious education documentation and the assembly witnessed was of good quality, enhanced by gospel readings and singing of a very high standard. The assembly observed by inspectors included a very effective and thought provoking question and answer session, revealing a high level of religious knowledge by the children. Each class has a prominent focal prayer table with age appropriate Bibles, artefacts and pictures. The school has good links with the parish which uses the school after Mass each week for refreshments. The children attend a fortnightly Mass in the church which is a short distance from the school. This Mass is prepared by the children working with their teachers. All staff meetings provide an opportunity for prayer.

Chaplaincy

Grade 2

Chaplaincy provision is effective although informal with all staff participating. The links between the governors and parish are very cordial on a personal as well as a professional level. The school works with the parish, including preparation for the sacraments. The parish priest recently visited the school to carry out a demonstration baptism and to bless the newly created prayer area. However, he is not able to visit the school as often as he would wish. Prayer groups are organised for the children by their teachers, who themselves often pray together. As more children are now attending the school from the Daventry area, priests from that parish have now visited the school. Members of staff have trained as Rainbows facilitators.

Community Cohesion

Grade 1

The school's contribution to community cohesion is outstanding. It is fully involved in the community where it is situated and further afield. Children from the village whose parents wish it, and where vacancies allow, are admitted to the school, regardless of faith. The school raises large sums of money for various charities both locally, nationally and overseas. Most recently these include Cafod, "Race for life", a cancer charity and "Mission Together" supporting an orphanage in Uganda. St Mary's also supports a school in Sierra Leone through the charity Educaid and has made a donation to The Northampton Association for Single Homeless. Given the small number of children, these donations demonstrate an outstanding attitude of caring for

the less fortunate. The school has taken the children to the central London mosque and included Muslim and Jewish celebrations in their work, teaching the children about other faiths. The outstanding school choir sings at various events, including in the village. The school is part of the Thomas of Canterbury partnership working with other Catholic schools in Northampton town and, additionally, they join with staff at Blessed George Napier Secondary School in the neighbouring diocese of Birmingham for an annual religious training day. St Mary's is also in the process of linking with a school in France. Recently, the school asked for volunteers from the community to spend a Saturday morning working on allotments for the children. Around fifty governors, parents and staff responded. The school demonstrates its concern for the environment in a number of ways, including taking part in the village "litter pick". St Mary's also works closely with the University of Northampton and is a lead literacy school".

Achievement and Standards in Religious Education

Grade 1

The knowledge of their faith displayed by the children when questioned was outstanding. Attainment on entry to the school is above average and this is enhanced by very good teaching at foundation level. Good progress is made as the children move through the school. By the end of their time at St Mary's, most children exceed national expectations for religious education. Pupils spoken to were very knowledgeable about their faith and enjoyed their RE lessons. There are opportunities for them to reflect on the links between the life and teachings of Jesus and their own lives. Behaviour is outstanding and pupils show respect for each other and themselves. At the children's suggestion, the school has now introduced a "Buddy" system where older children care for new arrivals and younger children and help keep them safe at playtimes. The school provides a very good atmosphere for social and moral education. The good quality of RE and the emphasis the school places on individual development ensures that standards are likely to improve further.

Teaching and learning in Religious Education

Grade 2

The quality of teaching and learning in RE in the school is good. Lessons observed during the inspection varied from satisfactory to outstanding and were appropriate for the age of the children. Questioning techniques are generally very good and often provide a good level of challenge. Children were observed engaged in interesting and stimulating tasks. In the main teachers have high expectations and pupils respond with thoughtfulness and enthusiasm. Children are often given research assignments in RE, prompting a good level of independent learning. One example was to research the origin of their confirmation names. Every child has a learning log. The standard of work in the children's books is good overall, although there is some inconsistency in marking. There are written comments designed to move the children forward in some classes though little general evidence of differentiated work was observed by Inspectors. Parents and carers are sent information leaflets with details of the curriculum and encouraged to attend assemblies and liturgies. Parents spoken to expressed a high level of satisfaction with the RE provided by the school and the good level of communication offered by all members of staff.

Quality of the Religious Education Curriculum

Grade 2

Overall, the quality of the curriculum is good. At least 10% of curriculum time is used for religious education which follows the 'Here I Am' programme. All staff work very hard to ensure the subject has a high priority. Planning overall is good and shows evidence that teachers are building on prior attainment and experience. The curriculum supports the personal, spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils. Staff are encouraged to, and do, attend available training arranged by the Diocese and other professional bodies. However, further work is required to develop subject knowledge and good practise in the assessment of RE across the school. Parents are very happy with what is taught in RE.

Leadership and management of RE is outstanding. The headteacher gives RE a high priority and works very hard to ensure high standards are maintained and that staff new to the school are well supported. The RE co-ordinator and headteacher monitor planning, workbooks and lessons. They also carry out joint observations of RE lessons. Reporting and assessment procedures are in place and the school has introduced the revised RE levels of attainment. The school strives to be true to its mission Statement: "St Mary's, a place of educational excellence with Christ at its centre".