



Diocese of Westminster

St Mary's Catholic School
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DFE Number: 919/5422
URN Number: 117594

Headteacher: Mr A Sharpe
Chair of Governors: Rev J Cunningham

Canonical Inspection under Canon 806 on behalf of the Archbishop of Westminster
and inspection of Denominational Education under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005

Date of inspection: 22 November 2012
Date of previous inspection: January 2008

Reporting Inspector: Mr D Scott

Introduction

The inspector would like to thank the governors, headteacher, staff, students and parents for their co-operation over the conduct of the inspection. The inspector spent a day in school, visited six lessons and an assembly, and carried out six interviews with school staff, students and governors. Other evidence was gathered from contacts with parents through a questionnaire, scrutiny of a sample of students' work, observation of students in and out of lessons, examination of school documents, and attendance at religious services.

The Inspection of St Mary's Catholic School, was carried out under the requirements of the Education Act 2005, and in accordance with the Framework and Schedule for Section 48 Inspections approved by the Archbishop of Westminster. The inspectors are appointed by Archbishop. The inspection reviews and evaluates how effective the school is in providing Catholic education. This process begins with the school's own self-evaluation.

Description of School

The school is a five form entry in the LA of East Hertfordshire and the locality of Bishop's Stortford. The school serves the Lea Valley Deanery in the Archdiocese of Westminster, and the Uttlesford district of the diocese of Brentwood. The proportion of students who are baptised Catholic is 94%. The proportion of students who are from other Christian denominations is 4% and from other Faiths 0.3%.

There are 900 students on roll, with 19 students with statements of Special Educational Need. The proportion of students from ethnic minority groups is above average. The number of students speaking English as an Additional Language is well below average. There is a well below average of families claiming free school meals. Just over half of the staff members are Catholics and 8% hold the CCRS or other Catholic qualifications. Religious Education lessons are taught by six specialist staff.

Key for inspection grades:

Grade 1: Outstanding;*
Grade 1: Very Good;
Grade 2: Good;
Grade 3: Requires improvement;
Grade 4: Causing Concern.

A. Classroom Religious Education

How religiously literate are pupils in the teachings and traditions of the Catholic faith and how well do they know, understand and appreciate the importance of religious faith and practice in everyday life?

What is the overall effectiveness of classroom religious education in developing pupils' religious literacy?

Overall Grade: I*

Curriculum Religious Education is excellent overall in developing students' religious literacy. The implementation of the Curriculum Directory is well developed and supports very well all provision at each Key Stage. As a result students have a very good knowledge of the religious education curriculum and understand well how it must be witnessed in daily life. They are encouraged to reflect on what they believe and why they believe. Students achieve highly and are well versed in the Levels of Attainment and in how to make progress. The leadership of the department has high expectations and communicates these very well to both staff and students. Self-evaluation is honest and accurate. The department's contribution to supporting the school's mission is exemplary and increasingly permeates all aspects of school life.

What has improved in classroom religious education since the last inspection and what should the school do to further improve in classroom religious education?

At the last inspection, the school was asked to consolidate and disseminate good practice, maintain high standards, review assessment procedures and extend partnerships with the wider community. All these aspects have improved significantly as evidenced by the 'best results ever' being achieved in 2012.

In order to sustain and improve on this achievement the school has agreed the following areas for improvement in curriculum Religious Education:

- maintain the high level of attainment and progress and learning in Religious Education by developing the use of probing questioning in lessons which give students opportunities to extend and explain their ideas more fully and
- by ensuring all learners are actively engaged in their learning thus promoting independent thought and enquiry.

How well does the content of classroom religious education meet the requirements of the Curriculum Directory?

Grade I*

Religious Education is at the heart of the school and is particularly well supported by the headteacher and senior team. Other staff also greatly value the positive impact of the ethos generated on the spiritual, moral, cultural and social development of the students. A creative, broad and ever expanding resource base integrates exceptionally well new materials into established programmes. There is a good range of visual and interactive resources as well as a large library collection of books on current and historical themes relevant to Catholic life. The delivery of curriculum Religious Education meets all of the requirements of the Curriculum Directory. The programmes of study and schemes of work for all three Key Stages illustrate clearly how and when the curriculum directory content is taught and assessed.

Meticulous attention to detailed cross-referencing of the objectives from the Curriculum Directory with diocesan attainment targets provides excellent guidance for staff as to common assessment tasks for Years 7 to 9. A similarly rigorous approach characterises the school's work at GCSE and in the general religious education programme for Years 12 and 13. Lesson planning consistently focuses specific areas of the Curriculum Directory. There are very good links to other faiths and stimulating opportunities for dialogue are carefully mapped and developed. The department strives assiduously to promote students' deep understanding of the nature of the religious quest and to encourage their awareness of common elements with other faiths.

Pupil achievement (as well as attainment and progress) in religious education

Grade 1*

Students typically achieve highly in Religious Education at each Key Stage. Students' attainment in Religious Education compares very favourably with their performance in other subjects at all Key Stages and is well above average. In GCSE examinations, 88% of students gained a grade A*-C in 2012 – a record for the school. A higher proportion of students gained A*/A grades in Religious Education than their peers nationally. Students also exceed their performance in other subject areas. Students make excellent progress throughout their time in the school. Those post-16 students following Level 3 courses in Religious Studies do well in both A2 and AS examinations. The general course for all post-16 students involves them well in the liturgical life of the Church as well as in extensive service for others. The latter efforts are recognised by a number of external agencies, are moderated internally and verified by the Diocese. Baseline assessment tasks at Key Stage 3, carefully linked to, and tracked against diocesan attainment targets, demonstrate outstanding progress over time. Work is carefully moderated and the school takes seriously its target setting and tracking of Religious Education and monitors progress rigorously.

The quality of teaching

Grade 1*

The six fully qualified specialist staff have a very good intellectual understanding of the Catholic faith. This deep knowledge supports their common vision to advance the students' grasp of the curriculum and their commitment to the school's Catholic life. Team teaching, mutual support and robust monitoring and evaluation all contribute to sustaining teaching that is consistently outstanding.

High expectations, challenging tasks, including those for the most able, encourage students to reflect independently on their faith and to think critically about the Church's global mission. Relationships between staff and students are excellent and as a result this leads to positive attitudes to learning. In the lessons observed during the inspection, students confidently expressed their ideas, appropriately challenged others and communicated good understanding, both orally and in writing. Teachers plan exceptionally well to use a wide range of strategies and resources that capture the students' interest in the Church's teaching, ethics, charity activities, liturgy and traditions. This was very well demonstrated in a Year 8 lesson on reconciliation. Students were very well informed on the Sacrament of Reconciliation and what the concept means in life.

Central to the students very good progress is the increasing involvement of the students in assessing their own progress. Teachers also mark and assess students' work regularly, thoroughly and constructively, identifying clear targets for improvement. As a result, students mostly know clearly how to improve their work. However, the scholarly ethos generated in many classrooms also contributes much to the students' development. This was demonstrated well in a Year 12 lesson

where students were engaged in a lively debate citing examples of Cosmic Fine-Tuning in discussing how improbabilities support the Anthropic Argument. In a number of lessons during the inspection, students were very actively engaged in drawing on wider reading and reflection to support the work in hand.

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of religious education

Grade I*

The religious education department is very well led and managed. The newly appointed subject leader has settled in well. In a short space she has cultivated a strong collegiate ethos within a strong team of well qualified specialist teachers, including the Chaplain. The department has a shared, clear vision of its role within the school. Senior leaders are highly supportive of its work in striving to uphold Gospel values as exemplified in the school's mission statement. There is a relentless focus on improving teaching and learning through a range of professional development activities. The department works collaboratively with diocesan personnel, with the Chaplain and members of the governing body. Within the school, there is excellent cooperation with other departments and particularly with the music, PSHE and science departments. The impact of this close collaboration is reflected in the carefully planned liturgical celebrations. The subject leader has brought fresh impetus and ideas to improve the quality of teaching to ensure it matches the needs of all students.

B. The Catholic life of the school

How well do pupils experience the richness of a Catholic way of living and believing through all areas of school life?

What is the overall effectiveness of the Catholic life of the school in developing pupils' experience of the richness of a Catholic way of living and believing?

Overall Grade: I*

Religious Education is valued and recognised as the core of the curriculum both by adults and by many of the students. This is demonstrated in the priority given to the allocation of curriculum time, resources and staffing. Worship and prayer are central to the life of the school and offer students a rich experience of Catholic tradition. Liturgical celebrations are well linked to the Church's calendar and students play a very active part in their preparation and planning. The school is committed to excellence in all facets of its provision. Governors are strong supporters of the Catholic ethos of the school and offer very good support to the leadership of the school as well as to the religious education department.

What has improved since the last inspection and what should the school do to further develop the Catholic life of the school?

Since the last inspection, the school has made improvements in the areas highlighted in the previous report.

As a result of detailed reviews and evaluation, the school has agreed that the following areas are a priority for improvement:

- extend opportunities for pupils to participate and lead liturgy
- strengthen the role of students still further in the formal evaluation of the Catholic life of the school.

The place of religious education as the core of the curriculum – time, staffing, accommodation, resources, budget

Grade I*

The school fully meets the requirements of time of the Curriculum Directory. At Key Stage 3 and 4, students spend 10% of the available curricular time in Religious Education. At post-16, the school exceeds the 5% requirement with 6.25% of the time devoted to Religious Education. The department rejoices in a fully specialist staff, including the school Chaplain. It also benefits from a generous budget that exceeds that of other core areas. The leadership team, very well supported by governors, offers outstanding support and guidance to the department in promoting the religious life of the school and the religious education of the students. Staff, whatever their backgrounds, receive thorough induction and training on the Catholic practice of the school. As a result, support for liturgical events is strong and all staff appreciate the spiritual opportunities within the school.

The experience of Catholic worship – prayer and liturgy – for the whole school community.

Grade I*

Prayer and worship are central to the life of the school. Liturgical events and daily prayers reflect the rhythm of the Church's calendar and the Gospel values are embedded in the school's ethos. Year and Form masses follow a regular rota and the 'Liturgical Diaries' are used well to capture key moments in the students' spiritual lives. Students are fully involved in planning such occasions both in the school and in the nearby church. The retreat programme is well established and students speak very enthusiastically of their experiences and particularly how it helped them to make new friends. There is a high participation rate in the liturgy as readers, altar servers and Eucharistic ministers. The chaplaincy team, together with sixth form students coordinate whole school masses and liturgies. Assemblies emphasise the importance of the Catholic life of the school and focus on worship and reflection around liturgical themes. During the inspection, an assembly was observed inspired by 'The Year of Faith' where students described aspects of their own personal faith journey. Students have regular opportunities for the Sacrament of Reconciliation highlighted in Lent. The school provides outstanding opportunities to promote the students' spiritual development through reflection and meditation, discussion and shared understanding of what it means to be a practising Catholic. Students' responses to a recent survey indicate that the majority of learners consider that the school helps them effectively to develop their Catholic faith. There is also sensitive and well-considered provision for those students of other Christian and non-Christian staff and students.

The commitment and contribution to the Common Good – service and social justice.

Grade I*

The school's commitment to action for social justice is outstanding. Charity initiatives, visiting speakers, citizenship programmes and the religious education curriculum all make a tremendous contribution to students' knowledge and understanding of social justice issues. Opportunities to serve begin in Year 7 and develop throughout their school life. All sixth form students complete Community Service. Students display remarkable sensitivity to those less privileged than themselves and high levels of personal commitment to working together for the common good. Among numerous examples include donating 'Shoeboxes' for Operation Christmas Child and raising money for the school's nominated charities such as CAFOD, Catholic Children's Society, Regina Coeli (HIV/AIDS) in South Africa and Teenage Cancer Trust. Sixth-form students organise the annual Charity Week with events ranging from 'Teachers Got Talent' to 'Strictly Come Prancing'. Year 10 students participate in a LIFE Conference debating the issues surrounding 'The Theology of the body'.

Nationally and internationally, the students have a wide appreciation and understanding of cultural differences. For example, following consultation, the school organised the appropriate positioning of a copy of the Qur'an in the school Chapel.

The underpinning value of respect for diversity ensures that very harmonious relationships exist across and among the ethnic groups within the school. Each individual is valued, talents recognised and those with special needs of any kind well supported and helped to participate fully in the life of the community. Students are very aware of the moral and social issues within our society and are keen to share their views, listen to others and reflect on the impact of their actions and those of others.

Enabling the authentic partnership between parents, school and parish as an integral part of the Diocese, particularly through its relationship with the Diocesan Bishop and those acting on his behalf;

Grade I*

There is a very strong commitment among senior leaders and the overwhelming majority of staff to the school's mission as a Catholic institution within the Archdiocese of Westminster. Leaders and managers at all levels along with governors and the Chaplain are regularly involved in diocesan

events and meetings. Excellent relationships are exemplified by the pastoral visit in 2010 by Bishop Stack and the opening of a new building in 2011 by Bishop Sherrington.

Students come to the school from nine different parishes. Newsletters, meetings with parish clergy, attendance at deanery meetings, attendance at parish events and invitations to school events to the parishes, all contribute to forming very good links between the school and its partner parishes. Liaison with the nine Catholic feeder primary schools forms strong initial links with parents of future students.

Parents are involved in the life of the school through a range of mechanisms and are invited to masses in the parish and their involvement in the students' education much encouraged. Around 93% of parents regularly attend parents evening.

The effectiveness of the leadership and management in promoting the Catholic life of the school.

Grade I*

Members of the governing body and senior leaders seek assiduously to ensure that Catholic life is central to the school. They monitor, support and challenge all aspects of Religious Education and the school's Catholic life. The leadership of the school encourages all staff to participate fully in the religious life of the school by providing spiritual INSET and maintaining prayer as an integral part of school life. As a result, staff participation in the religious life of the school is willingly given. The Chaplain provides regular support and guidance to what it means to be a member of the Catholic community. Guided by the headteacher, school leaders have a clear understanding of their strategic role in sustaining and furthering its Catholic ethos, its place in the community, and its role in developing well-qualified Catholic young people. As one student summed up, 'Our school is not just about exam results – it's about making you a nicer person'.



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Overall Grade 1*

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Grade 1*

Pupil achievement (as well as attainment and progress) in religious education

Grade 1*

The quality of teaching

Grade 1*

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of religious education

Grade 1*

B. The Catholic life of the school

What is the overall effectiveness of the Catholic life of the school in developing pupils' experience of the richness of a Catholic way of living and believing?

Overall Grade 1*

The place of religious education as the core of the curriculum – time, staffing, accommodation, resources, budget

Grade 1*

The experience of Catholic worship – prayer and liturgy – for the whole school community

Grade 1*

The commitment and contribution to the Common Good – service and social justice.

Grade 1*

The partnership between parents, school and parish as an integral part of the Diocese, particularly through its relationship with the Diocesan Bishop and those acting on his behalf

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