

St Mary's Catholic First School

Hexham

URN: 148261

Catholic Schools Inspectorate report on behalf of the Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle

14 March 2024

Summary of key findings

Overall effectiveness

The overall quality of Catholic education provided by the school

Catholic life and mission (p.3)

How faithfully the school responds to the call to live as a Catholic community at the service of the Church's educational mission

1

Religious education (p.5)

The quality of curriculum religious education

2

Collective worship (p.7)

The quality and range of liturgy and prayer provided by the school

2

The school is fully compliant with the curriculum requirements laid down by the Bishops' Conference

Yes

The school is fully compliant with all requirements of the diocesan bishop

Yes

The school has responded to the areas for improvement from the last inspection

Fully

2

What the school does well

- St. Mary's is a vibrant, warm, and welcoming first school where the Catholic life and mission is displayed prominently throughout the school.
- It is a very inclusive school with a deep sense of community, and this enables pupils, staff, and parents to flourish in a nurturing and caring community where each person is valued.
- Catholic life and mission offers pupils a variety of opportunities to put their faith into action and supports the needs of both their local and global communities.
- Religious education is given high priority and effective professional development is evident in practice.
- Prayer and liturgy provide the daily focus and are the heartbeat of the school, where pupils act with reverence and are keen to participate.

What the school needs to improve

- Provide opportunities for pupils to articulate the impact of provision within Catholic life and mission, and prayer and liturgy on themselves and others.
- Provide opportunities for pupils to develop their skills in evaluating prayer and liturgy, enabling them to identify how further improvements can be made.
- Redress the imbalance of teacher talk in religious education lessons, so that pupils have time to reflect and respond to teachers' questioning.

Catholic life and mission

How faithfully the school responds to the call to live as a Catholic community at the service of the Church's educational mission.

Catholic life and mission key judgement grade

Pupil outcomes

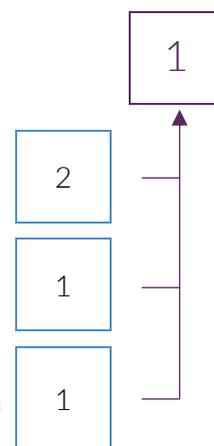
The extent to which pupils contribute to and benefit from the Catholic life and mission of the school

Provision

The quality of provision for the Catholic life and mission of the school

Leadership

How well leaders and governors promote, monitor, and evaluate the provision for the Catholic life and mission of the school



St Mary's has a strong ethos which pervades the school, underpinned by clear mission and values which brings all stakeholders together, encouraging everyone to give their best. The school mission statement, 'we love, we learn, we live,' is understood and lived out by all and is at the heart of all the school offers. Pupils have a sense of belonging and are happy to be part of the school family of St Mary's. The family environment is nurtured from pupils' earliest days in school. Pupils are happy, confident and feel safe in school, they are respectful of themselves and others. The pupils value and respect the Catholic traditions of the school and strive to following in the footsteps of Jesus. The Mini Vinnies are committed to, 'turn their concern into actions.' Through their role and the Regenerators, pupils' contributions to shaping the school's Catholic life and mission are developing. They are involved in the many opportunities the school provides to support local and global communities, as shown in their support of Tyneside Hospice, The People's Kitchen, Macmillan Coffee Morning and Cafod's Big Lenten Walk. Although pupils can describe these activities, their ability to articulate how they reflect the Church's mission or the personal impact is limited.

The mission statement is integral to the recently updated behaviour policy, with pupils being awarded value cards at school and at home if they have lived out the school values and mission; consequently, behaviour is exemplary. There is a strong sense of community at all levels and strong relationships are evident. The deeply committed staff work very hard to ensure the school mission is lived out daily. There is a genuine culture of welcome at St Mary's. Staff strive to lead by example consistently, showing respect to each other and to all pupils. A high level of pastoral support is offered to pupils and their families. One parent spoke appreciatively, saying, 'The school is a family community, and every child is valued.' St Mary's is equally supportive of staff, resulting in high morale, positive relationships and senses of belonging and pride. The environment effectively reflects the mission of the school through vibrant displays and a

liturgical space which highlights and celebrates its Catholic mission and identity. Relationship, sex, and health education is well planned, explicitly referencing Catholic teaching and principles.

Christ is at the centre of St Mary's due to leaders' drive and ambition. Leaders and governors are passionately committed to the Church's mission, to Catholic education, and to Catholic social teaching. Consequently, they are ambitious about the school's contribution to the life of the community it serves, inviting parishioners to join in school's Big Lenten Walk. They see the promotion of an authentic Catholic ethos as fundamental to their roles. Leaders share the vision in a very visual and age-appropriate way, reflecting the pupils' ages and stages of development. The head teacher provides very focused leadership and is highly visible within the school and the parish community. She has placed the school at the heart of parish life and is an inspirational role model for staff, pupils, parents, and the wider community. This vision is shared by all. One staff member commented, 'Links with the parish and wider community are encouraged, embraced and enjoyed.' Staff feel valued, supported, and listened to. The school's self-evaluation is aspirational and becoming a more accurate reflection of the school. Monitoring is leading to a more clearly focused plan for further improvement. The school actively participates with the diocese through the access of a variety of training opportunities and briefings.

Religious education

The quality of curriculum religious education

Religious education key judgement grade

Pupil outcomes

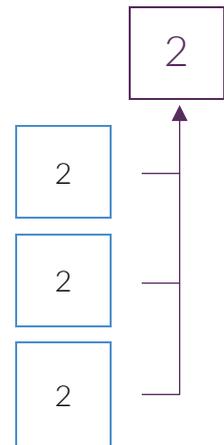
How well pupils achieve and enjoy their learning in religious education

Provision

The quality of teaching, learning, and assessment in religious education

Leadership

How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for religious education



Pupil outcomes in religious education (RE) are good because most pupils recognise the importance of RE and most enjoy their lessons. This is evident in their responses during lessons where pupils are motivated and keen to take part. Pupils are given a range of creative and engaging tasks that provoke pupils' interest. Consequently, most pupils concentrate well and work at a good pace. Pupils are given opportunities to develop their learning beyond the classroom and weekly Open the Book sessions; led by members of the Local Churches Together group, enhance their knowledge and understanding of scripture. As a result, pupils' religious literacy and their ability to respond thoughtfully is growing. Most pupils, including those with special educational needs, are making good progress over time across a range of skills and are developing well in their knowledge of key concepts. Pupils with additional needs are supported well so that they can access the curriculum and make progress from their starting points. From the earliest age, pupils are encouraged and able to discuss their learning; a Reception class child commented, 'We are decorating the cross because Jesus died and it's purple because it's Lent.'

The school has effectively interwoven Catholic social teaching throughout the curriculum and there are clear explicit links between religious education and prayer and liturgy. For example, a whole school Lenten prayer focus of 'Act, Give, Pray' was used in all classes as a springboard for all religious learning activities during the inspection. Due to focused staff training, teachers have a growing subject knowledge and show a commitment to the subject's value. Additionally, a calm and purposeful atmosphere conducive to learning is created. Planned activities are varied and staff are used very effectively to support pupils with special educational needs. Pupils spoke with great enthusiasm about the parish priest coming in to enrich their learning. Recap activities are used to begin lessons and build on pupils' prior knowledge. The use of questioning by teachers is developing, however, there, is an imbalance between teacher and pupil talk, meaning opportunities for pupils to respond and ask their own questions during lessons are limited. Big questions are used effectively to frame learning. 'I wonder' and 'I reflect' are becoming used more

consistently, meaning pupils' ability to understand how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve is beginning to emerge.

Leaders have a shared enthusiasm for RE. The subject leader is committed to ensuring that pupils are given the best opportunities to learn. She has a clear vision and articulates the desire and ambition for the further development of the subject. She ensures that it is the core of the curriculum and that there is parity in terms of quality and quantity of work produced by pupils, compared to that with other core subjects. The relatively new leader is supported well by experienced colleagues from Bishop Wilkinson Catholic Education Trust. Consequently, monitoring systems including book looks, learning walks, observations and pupil voice activities are becoming embedded so leaders can make informed judgements about provision. From this, a well-planned programme of staff training is established, including diocesan Foundation Stones which are used as part of monthly mentor professional development for Early Career teachers. Self-evaluation procedures are effective and are used as a tool for improvement. Governors are visible around school and are routinely involved in a range of monitoring and evaluation activities. Therefore, they have a good understanding of the quality of religious education across the school and are supportive and confident in their ability to challenge. They are very proud of the school.

Collective worship

The quality and range of liturgy and prayer provided by the school

Collective worship key judgement grade

Pupil outcomes

How well pupils participate in and respond to the school's collective worship

2

Provision

The quality of collective worship provided by the school

2

Leadership

How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for collective worship

2

2

St Mary's is a prayerful community where pupils join in prayers appropriately and with growing confidence. Prayer is very visual and interactive, meaning from the earliest age children participate with respect, sing joyfully and enthusiastically, and reflect in prayerful silence. Pupils respond respectfully and thoughtfully when participating in prayer and liturgy. They have a good understanding of the Church's liturgical year and its seasons; pupils can describe how they are celebrated in school. They are becoming more confident in including elements of Catholic social teaching and Laudato Si, into their experience of liturgy. They are not yet able to confidently articulate the impact these experiences have on themselves and others. Blocked time is given for the planning of class celebrations of the word. Therefore, dependent upon their age, pupils are becoming more equipped to prepare and lead worship. They use a variety of resources including scripture, liturgical music, and religious artefacts. However, time is not routinely given for pupils to evaluate these opportunities. Pupils are aware that religious beliefs are important, demonstrating respect for their own faith and the faith of others.

Prayer is central to the school's life. There is a clear policy and a planned programme for prayer and liturgy which includes regular class and whole school prayer liturgies and joining with the parish community to celebrate Mass. School provides a variety of opportunities for prayer including meditation and prayer journaling. The school environment is used creatively to develop engaging prayer spaces which highlights the liturgical seasons and the monthly prayer focus for the current 'Year of Prayer'. Owing to whole school training and support, staff are becoming well equipped in helping pupils to plan and lead liturgical prayer. This helps them to develop pupils' independence in line with their age and capacity. Staff act as positive role models for pupils. Whole school and class prayer and liturgy occasions, have a clear purpose and direction; messages and the themes are chosen to reflect a good understanding of the liturgical seasons. The Lenten theme of 'Give, Act, Pray' was evident in all elements of worship. Prayer and liturgy are creative and engaging rooted in Catholic social teaching and, including Laudato Si messages, as well as links to the schools' curriculum, which help pupils become global citizens.

Leaders and governors, including the parish priests, place a high priority on prayer and liturgy and ensure it reflects the school's mission and the Catholic Church's traditions and values. The prayer and liturgy policy outlines the expectations for progression across school. The head teacher has a clear approach to ensure pupils can access the word of God. Leaders model good practice and have an understanding of the Church's liturgical year which they use to good effect in developing the pupils' knowledge and understanding of Catholic rites and symbols. Staff training has ensured they are effective role models and understand the importance of this in the development of their subject knowledge. A staff member commented, 'Leaders effectively support me to plan and lead experiences of prayer and liturgy.' As a result, this is reflected when pupils lead prayer and liturgy which is engaging and thought provoking. Leaders are developing time to celebrate the uniqueness of St Mary's. Opportunities for joint services, are leading to a flourishing partnership between school and parish. For example, a recent 'All Creatures Great and Small' service where pets were blessed. Governors are regular visitors to school, including leading Open the Book assemblies and as a result relationships between the governors and the school are a strength. Consequently, they provide effective support mechanisms to pupils, staff, and the whole community.

Information about the school

Full name of school	St Mary's Catholic First School
School unique reference number (URN)	148261
School DfE Number (LAESTAB)	9293840
Full postal address of the school	St Mary's Catholic First School, Hencotes, Hexham, NE46 2EE
School phone number	01434603791
Headteacher	Sarah Oakes
Chair of Local Governing Body	Nicola Vaughan
School Website	www.hexhamstmarys.uk
Trusteeship	Diocesan
Multi-academy trust or company (if applicable)	Bishop Wilkinson Catholic Education Trust
Phase	Primary
Type of school	Academy
Admissions policy	N/A
Age-range of pupils	4-9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Date of last denominational inspection	January 2016
Previous denominational inspection grade	2

The inspection team

Maria Elliott

Lead

Megan Clark

Team

Key to grade judgements

Grade	England	Wales
1	Outstanding	Excellent
2	Good	Good
3	Requires improvement	Adequate and requires improvement
4	Inadequate	Unsatisfactory and in need of urgent improvement