

Westminster Diocese Inspection Report

St Elizabeth's School

South End, Much Hadham, Hertfordshire SG10 6EW.

Date of inspection: 26 -27 May 2016



A. Classroom Religious Education

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

Overall Grade I

St Elizabeth's provides excellently for the development of the students' religious literacy. The curriculum is rich, meets all the requirements of the Curriculum Directory and is very well adapted to the needs of the students. Generally, students respond very well to the work in lessons, whatever their faith traditions. Teaching is mostly outstanding and never less than good. Imaginative resources of all kinds, including signing, encourage students' communication and understanding of the Gospel narratives. Students achieve as well as possible in religious education (RE) and mostly make the best progress they can. However, opportunities are sometimes missed to track the additional tiny steps that they make in their religious education development in subjects across the curriculum. Checks on learning and moderation of students' work are built into the cycle of the school year. Good or better learning is always fuelled by encouragement and praise. Senior staff, the head teacher and governors give high priority to RE and support the department very well in its outstanding contribution to the Catholic life of the school. The subject leader guides the department outstandingly well and knows clearly where improvements can be made. He works very well with the school chaplain so that for the students of all faiths, there is a seamless transition between classroom learning and worship. Members of the governing body are very active in supporting the school in developing the students' religious literacy. In discussion, governors demonstrated a very thorough understanding of the next steps for the school in classroom RE.

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 I

The Catholic life of the school is outstanding. The mission statement *'to be a sign of our love of God and for each other...by doing the best in all that we do'* underpins all aspects of school life. There is a strong sense of community and relationships within the school are excellent. Students and their families come from many faiths and cultures and all are included in the Catholic life. The quality of collective worship is outstanding. Students develop their relationship with God through regular reflection, celebration and liturgy, responding very positively. They know that we are all valued as children of God. Given the challenges faced by the community, students' behaviour and attitudes for learning are excellent in this warm and welcoming environment. A commitment to relentless self-improvement is driven by exceptional leadership and a highly committed staff team. The school ethos embraces and supports all members of the school, regardless of their faith backgrounds. In this very inclusive community, achievement and personal milestones are celebrated very effectively. The school benefits from strong links with the diocese and works collaboratively with a number of local schools. Governors are very active and dynamic in shaping the vision of the school. They have an excellent understanding of their strategic responsibilities, being guided exceptionally well by the chair who is unstinting in her devotion to the welfare of the students. They are very supportive of the Catholic life and are very well informed through regular reports and the frequent visits of the link Governor.

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 has improved in classroom religious education since the last inspection?

Since the last inspection, the school's religious education programme and its practice has evolved to consolidate much of the excellence of that time and to move on further with procedures for assessing and tracking students' progress. Regular continuing professional development has supported the staff in fulfilling the requirements of the Curriculum Directory. Reflection time is built into the school day, and includes Catholic social teaching themes. The turnover of staff has affected the number of staff with a Catholic qualification but plans are in hand for several staff to begin the course next term.

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

Grade I

The new curricular scheme is well referenced to the Curriculum Directory and to the exemplification material for P-levels. Progression is built carefully into the programmes for each zone to match very well the stage and learning of the students. All four areas of the Curriculum Directory are covered in each programme of study. The study of other faiths is carefully managed with a set of carefully put-together resources for each of the major faith groups. The school has adopted a topic-based approach to teaching about other faiths so that the coverage is relevant to the students. Programmes of study are underpinned solidly by excellent attention to the liturgical year. Assemblies, for example, follow the pattern of the liturgical year. Creative resources support the students' learning and include, visual, auditory, and other sensory resources. Signing and symbolism, evident throughout the school, are a real strength and are integral to the school's religious education programme. Likewise, religious education is integrated into many other aspects of the curriculum, such as art. However, the students' development in religious education across other subjects of the curriculum is not yet tracked and recorded fully in progress data.

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

Grade I

The school uses a commercial system to track the students' progress in developing their religious literacy as well as comparing the students' rates of progress with the national progression matrices for literacy at P-levels. The progress rates indicate that the proportion of students making expected and more than expected progress exceeds the national figures on all counts. Rates of progress in literacy appear slightly faster than those in religious education. However, this is partly because of the difficulties of recording some of the students' responses, particularly in subjects other than specifically religious education. The recent work of some of the higher attaining students on a visit to the school chapel, demonstrates genuine challenge so that that several students reached Level 3 of the attainment targets. This represents excellent progress from their starting points. Other groups also progress very well, even if their medical conditions make inroads into their long-term progress. For some, understanding that Jesus is a good person and that they are loved by God is a major step in their learning journeys.

The quality of teaching

Grade I

All staff at St Elizabeth's know the individual students exceptionally well. Their best interests and their religious development are at the heart of all that they do. Thus, a major strength of the teaching is the warm working relationship between staff and pupils. Support staff are integrated very

well into the lessons and play a major part in the students' learning. Religious education staff provide excellent role models for the students, demonstrating patience, kindness, perseverance, and resilience in the face of challenges. Typically, teaching across the school is at least good and more often outstanding. Teaching balances exceptionally well the presentation of concepts and ideas through concrete examples within the students' experiences. High expectations by all staff ensure that students develop very well in their their religious literacy within their present capabilities. Resources are excellent and range from visual illustrations of scripture through to digital aids and traditional religious artefacts. Similarly, staff manage signing very effectively so that students can link symbols and movements with words. Strategies to address the different needs of students are very well considered. This was demonstrated in the lessons seen, one on the Good Samaritan, one on the great commandment, another on pilgrimage, and one on how we are all in God's hands. Resources used are specific to each student, depending on their levels of communication, and involving music, visual material, reading and writing where possible. Assessment is ongoing in each lesson as are immediate rewards involving praise and encouragement. Students' work and teachers' assessments are regularly moderated across a the school and sometimes with other schools

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of religious education

Grade I

The quality of the leadership and management of religious education is outstanding. Staff training to deliver religious education is integral to the cycle of the school year. Much work has gone into empowering staff and students in using signing at all times to support communication. There is excellent attention to ensuring that resources enable students to understand the Gospel message. The impact on improving the quality of teaching is very successful. Senior leaders, the school chaplain and the governors support the subject leader's work very well, including his efforts to model excellent practice. There is a deep understanding of the school's mission to its pupils be they Catholic or of other faiths. Schemes of work have been very carefully developed to match not only the requirements of the Curriculum Directory but also the very different needs of individual students. There are regular opportunities for the most able students to extend their learning as far as possible. Systems, both commercial and in-house, are used very effectively to regularly monitor, track and ensure that the students make the best possible progress of which they are capable in communicating their religious understanding. However, there is scope to explore further how to audit and track the students' tiny steps in learning in religious education in other subject areas. There is a clear recognition of where improvements are needed. Self-evaluation is accurate and the drive to improve and provide even better for the students is at the heart of the department's work.

What should the school do to develop further in classroom religious education?

- Find ways to capture the tiny steps in learning that students make in developing their religious literacy in subjects across the curriculum.

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 has improved since the last inspection?

The school has continued to develop links with other local primary and secondary schools. The school's mission statement has been rearticulated through the value statement to which all members of the community have contributed. The statement is a living expression that touches all aspects of school life. Opportunities for reflection are now more structured than previously and are supported by new resources. As a learning community, further opportunities for reflection are shared with students and staff through the 'Thought for the Week', shared at staff briefing. Reflection time is built into the rhythm of the day, supporting a culture of celebrating achievement and thinking of others. Students regularly participate in celebrations of Mass and in Christmas and Easter liturgies.

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

Grade I

Students are at the heart of the school. Their needs, and the sense that all are children of God, and equally valued, pervade the school. Within this ethos, religious education is at the forefront of the curriculum. This is evidenced by the proportion of time allocated to teaching. This fully complies with the Bishops' Conference requirements. Capitation is on a par with other core subjects and the subject is well resourced. Teaching bases are vibrant and well maintained. Focal points for reflection celebrate an interpretation of Pope Francis' Year of Mercy. The Catholic identity of the school is evident throughout, not only in the chapel and prayer room but also in the well maintained grounds and the carefully placed artefacts throughout the school. Public display areas celebrate students' achievements. Textile displays around the theme of 'God's Wonderful World' celebrate a recent collaboration with a local artist to which all students contributed. All teachers and support staff new to the school are well supported in the teaching of religious education, and there are sensitive arrangements in place for the induction of all staff, including those from non-Christian faiths, in the Catholic life of the school. The school also recognises the emotional demands of working at St Elizabeth's and provides additional support for staff as required. Staff responses to questionnaires overwhelmingly conclude that they are valued and supported in their spiritual growth. All members of the community actively support the school's value statement 'to be a sign of God's love for us and for others' and are excellent role models for the students. The governors play an integral part in developing and reviewing the place of religious education in the school and lend active support in conducting learning walks and undertaking training for new staff.

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

Grade I

The experience of Catholic worship for the whole community is outstanding. A spirit of wonder and strong sense of the worth of each individual as a respected and loved member of God's family is evident in the school and embodied in the many events of its Catholic life. The chaplain plays an essential and valued part in the Catholic life of the school, providing witness, guidance and support to all members of the school community, irrespective of their faith background. His dedication and commitment to the school greatly enhance the provision for the school's Catholic life. Mass is available for the community on a daily basis and residential students are encouraged to attend on Sundays if they are on-site. Students are effectively prepared for liturgical celebrations in order to ensure their fullest participation and understanding. The school has supported candidates in their preparation to receive the Sacraments of Holy Communion and Confirmation. The Sacrament of

Reconciliation is offered to students during Lent and Advent and a blessing is offered to those of other faiths. Prayer and worship are an essential part of the life of the school. Opportunities are carefully planned, taking into account the needs and experiences of the learners. The use of MAKATON signing reflects the inclusive nature of the school, bringing all students, including those from other faiths, into the celebration and enhancing the experience for all. The school is very sensitive to the needs of other faiths, and has a dedicated prayer room available for quiet reflection and open to all. Staff place great value on the 'Thought for the Day' resources that provide teachers with a good platform for reflection time. The school works tirelessly to support all students in their personal faith journeys, frequently using resources that are highly tailored to student's individual needs. Students are encouraged to become familiar with important celebrations in the life of the Church. Key celebrations from non-Christian religions are also observed. The community comes together to celebrate Mass regularly, both at the start and end of the academic year, and to celebrate the Feast days of St Elizabeth of Hungary and of Blessed Marie Thérèse.

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

Grade I

Students participate in charity fundraising in support of others who are less fortunate than themselves. Causes are wide ranging and reflect the interests of the students from CAFOD to Children in Need, Comic and Sports Relief, Epilepsy Awareness and the St Elizabeth's Centre itself. Assemblies and visiting speakers support the fundraising efforts and specific themes across the school such as 'Global Goals for Change' reinforcing awareness of social justice and equality for all. Students are encouraged to care for others in their school community and beyond, through the theme of 'God's Wonderful World'. All students are given the opportunity to be responsible and develop a sense of independence through opportunities such as the school council and participation in a wide variety of clubs to enrich their learning experiences. Where possible, students contribute to good of the community through initiatives such as Busy Bees Enterprise. In this way, they are called to 'live life to the full'. These not only provide a vehicle for students to share and celebrate success, fostering a sense of pride and team building, but also to work together in service to others in the community. Fundraising events for 'Purple Day' raise resources to improve the social environment for the community of the entire campus. Occasions such as the Harvest Family Fast Day enable each class to make and share soup with each other, reflecting on the bounty of the harvest and contrasting with world hunger. School meetings for those who live on site help to foster understanding of group living and personal space in the context of the school values '... to live and learn as friends together, to share, give and love'. In this way, students learn to understand each other's needs and a culture of acceptance is fostered and nurtured.

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

Parents are very supportive of the life and work of the school in promoting Catholic education. All parents are invited to attend and celebrate key events with the school community from a Mass of welcome at the start of the year to dramatic performances at the end of each term. A recently completed questionnaire shows overwhelming support for the school and its leadership. Parents are kept well informed of the Catholic life of the school through regular newsletters and key information shared through the school's website. Parents are welcome visitors to the school and they increasingly choose to spend time with their children on site at weekends and during holidays. Good links with parents and external agencies reinforce the high standard of care, guidance and support that the school models and provides to ensure its students' safety and general well-being. The result is that the students flourish and are happy within this environment. The school makes every effort to keep parents both fully informed and fully involved in their child's' education but there are logistical considerations which prevent many from having daily contact with the school. Teaching

staff avail themselves of training opportunities provided by the diocese. The school has put itself at the service of the diocese, hosting conferences for both subject leaders in specialist schools and Westminster school chaplains. The subject leader regularly attends training and cluster meetings, working in close collaboration with other primary and secondary Catholic special schools and with its diocesan advisor.

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

Grade 1

The effectiveness of the leadership and management in promoting the Catholic life of the school is outstanding. The charism of the founding order of The Daughters of the Cross of Liege underpins the ethos of the school and impacts on every level of school life. Teachers and support assistants are excellent role models, leading and participating in school worship. The school continually strives to enhance the spiritual experience of its students and seeks an increasing variety of ways through which to develop their spiritual growth. Members of the governors, the head teacher and leaders at all levels have a very strong sense of the educational mission of the Church and the role of the school in expressing it. Senior staff and governors provide very clear direction for the Catholic life of the school. They communicate a strong sense of spiritual purpose, with a focus on promoting the highest standards, celebrating achievement and nurturing the richest personal development possible of each student as an individual. There is a close and effective partnership between teaching and care staff that is a considerable strength of the school.

What should the school do to develop further the Catholic life of the school?

- Raise awareness of the centre and its work throughout the diocese and neighbouring dioceses so that Catholic families with children who would benefit from the specialist care and support at St Elizabeth's are empowered to make informed choices.