

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

St Nicholas Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School	
Church Green, Harpenden, St Albans, AL5 2TP	
Current SIAMS inspection grade	Outstanding
Diocese	St Albans
Previous SIAMS inspection grade	Outstanding
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Name of multi-academy trust	N/A
Date of inspection	30 November 2017
Date of last inspection	23 October 2012
Type of school and unique reference number	Voluntary Aided - 117434
Headteacher	Rizelle Crouch
Inspector's name and number	Lilian Weatherley 42

School context

St Nicholas Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School was founded in 1858. It is a popular, smaller than average school with 154 pupils on roll. The school is situated in the town centre of Harpenden, adjoining the Parish Church of St Nicholas. Most pupils are from a White British background. There are five classes, each with two year groups. Four classes also have shared teachers. The proportion of pupils supported by additional funding such as the pupil premium and those with special educational needs is well below the national average. The headteacher has been in post since January 2016 and was previously the school's deputy headteacher.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Nicholas Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School are outstanding

- Led by the headteacher, the school's Christian vision and values are based clearly on Biblical teaching. Agreed by all stakeholders, they permeate the working life of the school and have a significant impact on pupil achievement and well-being.
- Religious education (RE) and worship have a high profile in the school and strongly support pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development.
- Prayer, reflection and mindfulness play an important part in the daily routine of the school and the curriculum. This has a significant impact on pupils' spiritual development.

Areas to improve

- Ensure that the quality of teaching in RE is consistently good or better across all year groups in order to raise standards and increase progress in the subject.
- Ensure planning and assessment take account of the two-year groups and range of teachers in each class and challenge the more able pupils.
- Review the school's website to ensure the Christian character of the school is explicit and fully reflects the strong distinctive Christian character of this voluntary aided school.

The school, through its distinctive Christian character, is outstanding at meeting the needs of all learners

Based on St Matthew's Gospel Chapter 19, the school's Christian vision 'Believe and Achieve' permeates all aspects of school life. Standards of attainment are high and well above the national average. Attendance is excellent and pupils say how much they love school and enjoy learning. The distinctive Christian character and key values of hope, perseverance, kindness and responsibility are known and understood by all the pupils. They are able to articulate how these values impact on their lives, their learning and their behaviour. 'They show us the right path in life. We believe they really affect our lives and actions'. The Year 6 pupils are proud to show their values book where they have linked each value to a Bible story and explained how these values impact on their own lives. Reward schemes reinforce these values and pupils are eager to nominate other pupils who demonstrate the Christian values in action.

Relationships across the school are excellent and behaviour is good. Pupils are polite and considerate and care about each other. They explain how there is no bullying because they all try to follow the Christian values of the school and 'this is important'. Pupil voice is strong and pupils benefit from regular monitoring through a range of questionnaires and interviews. The school council explained how they 'try to make things better' and that their next project is a wooden 'friendship bench' where pupils can go and sit with friends: 'A bit like the 'buddy bench' but for everyone.'

SMSC development is high on the school's agenda as well as the newly introduced 'mindfulness' which is having a significant impact and calming effect on the pupils. Pupils say how much this has helped in their lives. For example, when they have important events such as a music performance they take time to be mindful and to reflect. The school encourages prayer and reflection and pupils are involved in creating displays which enable them to 'stop and think'.

Citizenship and issues of right and wrong are regularly explored through worship, RE and personal, social and health education ensuring pupils have a deep understanding of the need for charitable giving to those who are less fortunate. The school house system is based on the four British saints and pupils are able to nominate a charity of their choice on their house saint's day. They explain how important this is and how they are currently packing presents for the annual Christmas box appeal. They also take regular donations to church each week for the local food bank.

RE has a high profile in the school and pupils are fully aware of diversity of culture and religion. The close proximity of the church facilitates a close link. Lunch is in the church hall, pupils contribute to the parish magazine and they regularly display prayers and RE work in the church. Pupils also take part in the church flower festival and Education Sunday. Each class also has a thought-provoking RE display based on the faith studied and some cross-curricular displays around the school show links to Biblical teaching.

Pupils' learning is enhanced by a range of visits and visitors from Christian traditions and those of other faiths. The school also has positive links through the Harpenden Plus Partnership 'Spotlight on Africa' with Musolo school in Uganda. Pupils send prayers and the children of Musolo school respond with theirs. Both RE and worship make a significant contribution to pupils' SMSC development. In a recent parents' questionnaire 92% felt that collective worship provides significant support for pupils' spiritual development. Parents praise the work of the school and say that the school offers 'a lovely start to life with its caring environment that nurtures faith and shows how to live out faith in everyday life'.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

Collective worship at St Nicholas is a key feature of each day and underpins the school's vision and values. The whole community regularly takes part and parents praise the impact of the weekly services in the church. Pupils say how much they enjoy worship and singing and they recognise the value of prayer and reflection in their own lives. The newly introduced 'mindfulness' is popular and linked to the school's Christian values. It is used by staff as a calming influence before worship. The well-established worship team of 14 has already had a significant impact on the worship. For example, they told staff that they want more time to be still and reflect. The group meets regularly with the incumbent and benefits from leading worship each half term. They explain how when planning they link Bible stories to the school's Christian values. 'We enjoy stories that affect people's lives'. They also feed back to the governing body and were instrumental in the purchase of individual pupil hymn books. In the worship observed, on the feast of St Andrew, the half termly value of 'trust' was used to explain how Andrew trusted Jesus enough to leave his fishing and become the first disciple. Pupils took an active role in dramatising the story, reading prayers and assisting with the technology. The singing was excellent and all pupils left with the understanding that they too have the opportunity to follow Jesus and spread His teaching.

Prayer and reflection play a key role in the school day. Regular use is made of the prayer boxes in each classroom which are then taken to the church to be blessed. Pupils know the Lord's Prayer and the school prayer, the Grace and Christian greetings and dismissals. They have a good knowledge and understanding of liturgical colours and an age-appropriate understanding of the Trinity. The vicar is a regular visitor to the school and strongly supports pupils in their understanding of aspects of the Anglican tradition. Key dates in the Christian calendar are celebrated in the church but Eucharists are not yet part of school practice. The vicar and his staff are however keen to introduce them in some form.

Since the appointment of the headteacher the school has begun visits to other places of worship. As the Roman Catholic school is oversubscribed and the Roman Catholic church is next door, links are mutually beneficial. Several Catholic pupils attend St Nicholas so the school feels it is important for them to share their worship. Pupils now benefit from visits and worship opportunities to Our Lady of Lourdes Roman Catholic Church, the local Methodist church and United Reformed Church. Worship is carefully planned around the church calendar and its monitoring and evaluation are rigorous.

The effectiveness of the religious education is good

Standards in RE are in line with those of other subjects and above the national average. Pupils enjoy RE and show a good knowledge and understanding of the Christian tradition and the other faiths studied. They enjoy learning about other beliefs and cultures especially Islam and Buddhism. Pupils develop a range of skills and are reflective in their learning. The work scrutiny, however, revealed that tasks set do not always show clear division between the age groups and key stages. Although there are many opportunities for cross-curricular links with art and drama, pupils are not given sufficient opportunities to show what they know, understand and can do. As pointed out in the recent Ofsted report there are 'insufficient opportunities for pupils to engage in extended pieces of writing' in RE.

The quality of teaching observed in RE is inconsistent. The majority of teaching is good or better and pupils are fully engaged with their learning. They rise to the challenge of high level questioning. However, where teaching is less than good pupils become restless and are not fully engaged. Tasks set are not sufficiently varied to offer challenge to the more able pupils. With two year groups and different teachers in each class there is a lack of accurate planning and assessment to ensure that the needs of all pupils are met in full, especially the more able.

RE has a high profile in the school and is regularly monitored. Questionnaires are used with pupils to assess how they feel about the subject. For example, questionnaires revealed the need for new Bibles and so all pupils now have their own Bible to use. Pupils enjoy using these and finding the relevant chapters during lessons. There are also Year 6 exit interviews which show how important RE is in pupils' lives. One pupil commented 'It helps you meet people of other beliefs and cultures and understand their practices. Even though their beliefs maybe very different to yours it helps you understand and respect them'. One parent interviewed, whose child had just passed RE GCSE with an A*, explained how her daughter said she found the exam quite easy, 'it was all down to St Nicholas and the grounding I received in Christianity'.

The school has an experienced RE subject leader who has been in post for several years. She is currently reviewing the scheme of work to incorporate 'Understanding Christianity' and the new Hertfordshire Agreed Syllabus. All staff have been trained on 'Understanding Christianity' and have trailed some of the materials. Pupils have produced an exemplary display on the key Christian concepts of the project and staff are excited by the prospect of introducing the concepts into the scheme of work in the new year.

The close links with the parish church and the clergy enhance the quality of the RE teaching and enable pupils to gain a deeper understanding of the Bible and the Christian tradition. The incumbent is the RE link governor and provides regular theological support for RE.

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of the school as a church school is outstanding

Since the appointment of the headteacher in 2016 the school has reviewed and rewritten its vision and values. This involved all stakeholders. Not only has this created a new vision for the future but it has brought together the school, church and community. All those interviewed praised the headteacher for this initiative and were able to articulate the vision and they all said how much impact this has had on the school, their children and the community. In the words of the governors, 'We are very proud of St Nicholas School. It is a nurturing environment where everyone can achieve their full potential. Faith and our Christian values are at the heart of everything we do.'

The governing body is effective and there is a strong team of foundation governors who form the basis of an active SIAMS group. They meet regularly and send out rigorous questionnaires to monitor performance of the school's distinctive Christian character. Results from the staff show that they are 100% proud to be part of the school and all support its distinctive Christian character. There is a detailed SIAMS self-evaluation and action plan and all issues from the previous inspection have been addressed in full. The recent health check has been used effectively to monitor progress and continue moving the school forward.

Senior leaders, parents, clergy and governors work closely together to create a Christian family atmosphere where everyone is regarded as unique and special in the eyes of God. Pupil wellbeing is given a high priority and staff meetings begin by identifying vulnerable pupils. The vicar also holds effective counselling sessions for pupils on bereavement. The school is in the centre of the town and governors and staff work hard to ensure that it is at the heart of the community. The regular coffee mornings and workshops held by the headteacher are seen as a great success in bringing parents, school and church together. Those interviewed expressed the view that these links have become much closer since the appointment of the headteacher.

The school website is informative and has an excellent guided tour of the school presented by the pupils. Although it contains much about the church/school links much is assumed rather than being explicit. For example, on the home page the school is referred to as St Nicholas CE VA rather than Church of England Voluntary Aided.

Pupils benefit from the excellent and effective links with the local church and parish. Parish clergy and the lay reader are regular visitors to the school and are very popular with the pupils. There are also close links with the diocese. Governors and staff praise the support from the diocese and the quality of diocesan training. The assistant head is currently undertaking the aspirational leaders' training.