

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

St John's Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School	Hertford Road, Digswell, Welwyn AL60BX
Current SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Diocese	St Albans
Previous SIAMS inspection grade:	Good
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Date of inspection	03 October 2016
Date of last inspection	27 September 2011
School's unique reference number	117460
Headteacher	Robert Price
Inspector's name and number	Judith Ruff 528

School context

St John's Voluntary Aided Primary School is of average size, with 234 pupils on roll. Pupils are mainly of White British heritage, but increasing numbers are from other ethnic minorities, including a growing number of African-Caribbean pupils. Approximately a third of the school come from Digswell village itself, with the remainder travelling from neighbouring villages or Welwyn Garden City. Numbers of pupils in receipt of pupil premium monies and those with special educational needs are below national averages. The school is situated in a united benefice, which includes three churches, one of which is a partnership church with the local Methodist community.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St John's Digswell as a Church of England school are good

- Distinctive Christian values, such as generosity and compassion, result in pupils having a deep concern for those less fortunate and lead into many charitable fundraising activities, such as for the Kalomo school link in Zambia.
- Prayer is deeply embedded within the life of the school and gives pupils a rich heritage, not only of Anglican prayers, but also leads to a cherishing of their own spontaneous and thoughtful reflections.
- Leaders confidently promote a Christian vision, driven and underpinned by biblical teachings, for the school. This has been faithfully sustained and developed over a significant period of time and leads to consistency of expectations and a security and clarity of expectations based on Christian values and teaching.
- Religious education (RE) has a high profile within the school. This results in pupils' deep appreciation of diversity and difference, whilst appreciating the uniqueness of individuals made in the image of God.

Areas to improve

- Increase the profile of Christian values taught within the school to both existing and prospective parents. This is to ensure an increased understanding of how these are enabling their children to flourish within a Christian context.
- Ensure the outcomes of monitoring and evaluation activities are discussed at governors and leaders meetings so they consistently inform school improvement planning.
- Fully utilise opportunities in religious education (RE) to develop pupils' spiritual awareness by ensuring that these are recorded in planning and seen in practice.
- Extend further pupils' opportunities to plan and lead worship across the school, so that they deepen their understanding of the structure and importance of worship to Christians.

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

'This school is founded on Christian principles that motivate the children to want to be good people', said one of the parents interviewed. This view is supported by the inspection findings. The Christian character of the school shapes the approach that is taken to all within the community. Firmly based on the example of Christ and his teachings, there is a respect and appreciation of each individual made in the image of God. Each one is valued for their innate ability to explore and develop a personal spirituality within a Christian environment. Across the school, the chosen Christian values are deeply embedded, although these are not made as explicit as possible to both visitors and existing parents at present. Pupils are able to talk confidently about how these values shape and define their lives, 'This school has taught me to be kinder', 'I try to be humble and not boast when I have done better than my friends, because that person has tried their best'. Pupil outcomes are high and progress of all groups of pupils, including those in receipt of pupil premium monies and those with special educational needs is at least good. This is because of the excellent levels of pastoral care within the school and initiatives such as the 'Peace Pals', a peer mentoring approach. These result in thoughtful, mature understanding and empathy with those who find it more difficult to conform to behaviour codes. Opportunities for spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development are good, enhanced through the house system, school and eco councils. These give pupils good opportunities to take decisions and responsibility for shaping the vision for their school. Relationships between all members of the school community are founded on mutual respect, love for one another and shaped by the exploration of practical applications of each monthly value. Pupils' understanding of Christianity as a multi-cultural world faith is developing. Particularly the link with Kalomo school in Zambia has sustained the pupils' interest and commitment over a significant period of time. They are actively involved in devising and organising fundraising activities, which have improved the information technology provision in the African school. Their generosity and compassion arise from a genuine concern for the educational opportunities available to their counterparts in Kalomo. RE makes a very positive contribution to both pupils' moral, social and cultural development and to the Christian character of the school. Whilst provision is good overall for spiritual development, opportunities for spiritual development in RE are underdeveloped. RE promotes an understanding for diversity within the Christian faith, through visiting three different locality churches within the benefice, including a partnership Anglican and Methodist church. In addition, pupils grow in their understanding as to how lives and values systems can be influenced by other religions. The open and engaging way in which Muslim, Hindu and Christian pupils listen, engage and debate their faith and what it means and looks like in practice is a strength.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good

Christian worship is seen as a central point of the school day. All members of the school community appreciate the impact that it has on bringing everyone together to praise, pray and reflect. 'It provides an opportunity to build fellowship and a sense of identity with the Christian foundation of the school' said one teacher. The values-focused worship has undoubtedly had a significant impact on pupils' attitudes, behaviour and relationships. They know Bible stories well and can link them to the chosen values. They speak confidently about the personal characteristics of Jesus and know how these shaped his response to the people that he met and those to whom he was closest. They want to follow his example by acting out the values that he lived in their own lives, particularly citing courage, friendship and forgiveness for those who do us wrong. Pupils are able to gain a good understanding of different Christian traditions in worship, not only through close links between the local joint Anglican and Methodist church, but also through a team of clergy and a parish reader, who lead worship weekly on a rota basis. Worship is planned well, using a variety of resources. Pupils, currently mainly those in Year 6, are involved in planning worship for special occasions. Pupils across the school write prayers, take part in role plays and sing with great enthusiasm a range of celebratory hymns and songs. Prayer is a strength of the school's life. One parent spoke movingly of his daughter being touched by the plight of the Syrian people spoken of in collective worship, and wanting to continue praying for them within the home environment. The half termly eucharist services are regarded as a very special opportunity to learn more about Anglican traditions and liturgy. Pupils who have been admitted to communion are very clear about the special symbolism contained within the service. The three local churches are all used well, for a wide range of services and musical presentations. Collective worship seen on the inspection day was age appropriate, the school splitting into two key stages for worship, with a lively introduction to this month's value of 'co-operation', where stories were acted out to illustrate the importance of working together. Pupils have a basic understanding of the Trinity, have looked at Trinitarian symbols and listened to Trinitarian prayers during worship. Monitoring of collective worship is happening, but there is insufficient evidence that the outcomes from this have improved collective worship provision over time.

The effectiveness of the religious education is good

A scrutiny of RE work on display around the school, work in pupils' books and a range of folders of work, including photographic evidence, show that standards in RE are in line with national expectations for the majority of pupils. Higher attaining pupils in RE are very knowledgeable, thoughtful and reflective in their oral contributions. Evidence in their workbooks shows that this ability is currently being constrained by the often closed tasks they are asked to do, frequently using worksheet formats as a starting point. Pupils are tracked across the school and they make good progress overall. In some year groups the amount of written work was too small, but pupils are engaged in many creative ways during lessons and a proportion of their recorded work is celebrated in a variety of displays around the school. The school has recently attended 'Understanding Christianity' training with the diocese and is trialling some of the units within school. This has already flagged up issues around the greater depth of pupil knowledge and understanding required and levels of teachers' confidence to teach these units from a theological perspective. Staff training in RE has increased teachers' ability to teach RE in a first-hand, investigative way. For example, the Year 2 class were busily exploring a number of clues left by a visitor and explaining their significance for Christians. In the Year 6 classroom, one of the pupils, who is also a Buddhist, was explaining her faith to others on her table in a very mature and confident manner. Pupils' attitudes to RE are very positive. Pupil representatives from the Hindu and Islamic faiths are very knowledgeable about Christianity and enjoy articulating the similarities and differences between the religions. The growing numbers of African-Caribbean pupils within the school also contribute very positively to this diversity of faith background. RE is also enlivened by a good visit and visitor programme, where pupils enjoy asking questions and experience first-hand how buildings are furnished and learn about the artefacts found in them. Teaching quality is good, this judgement supported by in-school observations as well as evidence from inspection observations across the school. Assessment is informing teaching and learning. Staff are currently focusing on what pupils learn about religion and how well they understand the relevance of their learning in order to judge their progress. Monitoring and evaluation leads to an accurate view of the current strengths and areas for further development. For example, the school has identified the need to further refine assessments in order to more fully involve pupils in the feedback process. Governor visits, particularly those from the local clergy members, are enabling their theological understanding to enhance the taught curriculum.

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

There is no doubt of the levels of importance and value that the senior leaders place upon their role in promoting and living out daily, through their words and actions, the Christian distinctiveness of the school. The Headteacher models, in particular those Christ-like values of friendship, forgiveness, humility and service, through his interaction with visitors, staff and pupils. The school's vision is clear through its mission statement. This is taken up conscientiously and effectively with stakeholders working in partnership to achieve this. For example, the Christian character committee has been effective in discussing issues such as the school website, researching into making it more visual in terms of the church foundation. At present, the good quality discussion taking place at these meetings is not being fed back to the main governing body, so levels of awareness and opportunities for involvement in these discussions are not present. Pupil outcomes are high because every child is known and loved as a unique child of God. For example, the vulnerable pupils' academic progress and well-being is placed at the fore-front of adults' focus and efforts, enabling them to make progress in line with expectations. Senior leaders ensure that both RE and collective worship have a high profile by co-leading them and ensuring that they make a significant contribution to the Christian distinctiveness. Parents interviewed are fully supportive of the importance that the school gives to ensuring that Christian values and ways of worship shape their child's character. They also appreciate the awareness of the diversity of the Christian faith, both locally and within global communities, such as Kalomo. Church leaders give significantly of their time and expertise to assist the pupils in exploring what it is to lead a Christian life and the importance of worship to believers. Self-evaluation is thorough, although a little overly optimistic. The school development plan contains plans to focus on improvements to the RE curriculum, but there is at present no overall cohesive plan for a SIAMS strategic vision. Foundation governors are committed in their role, diligently monitoring and visiting classrooms to get to know pupils. This growing knowledge is not yet used to full effect. Although there is a standing SIAMS agenda item at governing body meetings, it is too focused on information sharing. It is not sufficiently focused on next steps from monitoring and evaluation outcomes. Links with the diocese are good and courses support the development of staff as aspirant church school leaders.

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