



National Society Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools Report

Dr Thomlinson Voluntary Aided Middle School

Silverton Lane

Rothbury
NE65 7RJ

Previous SIAMS grade: Good

Current inspection grade: Outstanding

Diocese: Newcastle

Local authority: Northumberland

Dates of inspection: 10 May 2016

Date of last inspection: 24 and 25 May 2011

School's unique reference number: 122371

Headteacher: Liam Murtagh

Inspector's name and number: Canon Brian Hedley NS619

School context

Dr Thomlinson middle (deemed secondary) school sits on the edge of the Northumberland National Park. It serves the Coquet Valley – a sparsely populated rural area consisting of a small town, many hamlets and farms. Over half of the pupils are bussed into school. The socio-economic profile is above average. Almost all pupils speak English as their first language. The number of pupils eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs are below average. The headteacher was appointed in 2013. The school was inspected by Ofsted two weeks prior to this inspection; the overall judgement was that this is a 'good' school.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of Dr Thomlinson Middle School as a Church of England school are outstanding

- The embedded Christian ethos supports and sustains high achievement
- Talented leadership and governance results in astute self-evaluation; this shapes decision-making, drives action and enables learners to progress very well
- Exceptional pastoral care nurtures the uniqueness of each learner resulting in strong relationships, positive attitudes, high levels of self-esteem and confidence in learning
- Collective worship is highly valued, challenges learners to think for themselves and sustains the spiritual life of the school in meaningful and deeper ways
- Religious education (RE) is extremely well-led and managed. It anchors the school's values, allowing learners to test out their ideas safely and to make personal choices

Areas to improve

- Ensure that pupils are given time to follow up developmental marking in RE; this will deepen their responses to personalised questions and help them reflect further on their own life experiences and the choices they make
- Combine the SIAMS Schedule evaluation statements with overall performance data so that Christian distinctiveness and effectiveness is benchmarked more robustly

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

The strongly embedded, explicit Christian ethos at Dr Thomlinson middle school provides a secure foundation from which its life and work flourishes. Outstanding relationships and exceptional pastoral care exist at every level because the uniqueness of every person - seen as a child of God - is embraced, celebrated and nurtured. The head teacher, staff and governors define their role as being 'collaborative leaders of a spiritual journey'. As a result, the school's chosen core Christian values pervade, and the teachings of Jesus are at the heart of everyday practice. Learners recognise how this makes a difference. For example they speak convincingly about Koinonia, (interpreted as 'togetherness'), and can explain the way in which living out this value galvanises and secures community life, not just in school, but across the valley and beyond. Parents agree, saying that both school and church are passionate about what they do together: as partners they 'keep the needs of each child and family at the heart of everything' and, 'find ways to help parents do their best for their children, too'. Weekly newsletters, 'good news celebrations' and the school's 'open door' policy are hugely appreciated. Parents say that 'staff know the children inside out', and that 'every child is given responsibility then encouraged to rise to their own particular learning challenge'.

Both pupils and parents talked in a matter-of-fact way about occasional bullying and expressed appreciation about how the head teacher and governors tackle such issues with urgency and thoroughness, promoting education about hate crime, e-safety – safe social media use, and the like. An anti-bullying forum involving young people has been recently established.

When talking about how hard teachers work to make lessons easier to understand, pupils say how courage, perseverance and endurance can really make a big difference. The love and care pupils have for their school is tangible; they demonstrate highly positive attitudes, great self-esteem, and confidence in learning; consequently attainment is high and improving. A notable feature when talking to pupils is the level of mutual respect they show. This stems from the outstanding opportunities provided through the curriculum and extra-curricular activities, which enable learners to reflect on their personal values and beliefs, to consider their own strengths and weaknesses and to explore those same issues in relation to others.

The Illuminating Pathways programme followed in RE sets Christianity in a global setting. The syllabus constantly challenges pupils to think about diversity and difference both within the Church and in different faiths. This is helping to ensure that Dr Thomlinson middle school is not a Christian bubble. Perhaps the next step is to consider how pupils might learn to draw upon the deeply-held core Christian values in the next phase of their education and beyond.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

The school and parish work in a mutually beneficial partnership. As a result, well-planned, meaningful, age-appropriate worship is offered. Arrangements meet statutory requirements. House captains continually work with the rector of Upper Coquetdale to develop suitable and varied structures for liturgy. The outcome is a flexible framework reflecting Anglican traditions, whilst at the same time keeping everything accessible for those of other faiths and none. Coming together for worship 'as a family' is widely valued. Pupils acknowledge that the programme encourages them to think for themselves in deeper and thoughtful ways. They recognise the link between the gospel and core Christian values and say that this defines their school as a church school. Much has been done to make gatherings more interactive. For example pupils are 'challenged' to develop their thinking out-loud; they engage in activities such as 'partner talk', testing out ideas and interpretation of themes as part of worship. In addition, opportunities for times of reflection and prayer have also increased. So too have contributions from the choir and orchestra. All of this has expanded the numbers taking a regular, active part. A lot of work has been done to develop a clear understanding of the Trinity; this is now a strong feature in displays and pupils are able to talk about God being experienced in three ways. The decision to name the school's houses after northern saints (Cuthbert, Aidan and Bede) keeps day-to-day life and pupil achievements rooted in the Christian faith. Worship contributes a great deal towards learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC).

Parents praised the relationship between the rector and school, explaining that 'we are completely welcomed into all worship'. Learners' views about worship are collected and some analysis is made. However this needs to be done even more analytically to provide tangible evidence of the success or otherwise of the governors' worship policy.

The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding

Religious education (RE) is well led, managed and taught. The syllabus follows the 'Illuminating Pathways' programme, modified to suit the needs of this particular community. The majority of pupils arrive at the school without the benefit of having attended a church first school. As a result, standards in RE on entry are enormously variable. Governors have agreed to invest in additional teaching assistant hours to help bring attainment rapidly in line with other core subjects. By the time pupils reach Key Stage 3 standards in RE are at least equal to those found nationally with a significant number attaining higher.

Scrutiny of work and conversations with learners show how confident they become in using religious language. Higher order skills are used to analyse and evaluate different beliefs, perspectives and reliability of evidence. Over time, pupils acquire deeper insights into questions so their responses are more than their initial ideas. They are constantly encouraged to apply their learning to their own lives. For example, it's not enough to simply re-tell a story from the Bible; it's essential that they say what can be learned from it and how this might influence their own behaviour in the future. This is equally true of their spiritual development; it's not left to chance. Opportunities are carefully planned in by teachers. Pupils value visitors who come to school to talk of their faith: 'I liked the Sikh guy who told us how he got into it. I'm not exactly a believer myself but it was really interesting to hear him – it made me really think'.

Although pupils' work is monitored and assessed, developmental marking is not always responded to in sufficient detail. This could easily be rectified by building time into the start of each lesson and ensuring that adults check the outcome. Support and training for staff is focused. The RE governor is very experienced and works enthusiastically and pro-actively with the head teacher to move things on. For example governors have made the subject an item at their governor conferences and the school is currently working towards the RE Quality Mark. All of this is helping pupils to develop the specific skills they need to excel in RE.

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

This is a school that means business. Nothing is left to chance. The Head teacher and governors make sure that the strategic vision remains rooted in Christian values and that what is done adds significantly towards the drive to make this place a beacon in the area. As a result, the strong Christian ethos pervades and shapes decisions, drives actions and enables learners and staff to flourish. Governors have reorganised themselves so that, in addition to their corporate responsibilities, each oversees a Christian core value. Governors bring different strengths to the table; they challenge one other and the leadership team so that the inclusive Christian vision is never compromised. Collective Worship and RE have a high priority. This results in highly effective outcomes for pupils in both areas. Standards in RE continue to rise rapidly.

Accurate and insightful self-evaluation and reporting means that the school has a clear understanding of its strengths and areas for development. This is having a profound impact on achievement and well-being. Analysis would become even sharper if the SIAMS Schedule Evaluation Statements were combined with overall performance data.

Continuing professional development is linked to the school's improvement plan and associated performance management priorities; this is contributing hugely to the successful leadership and management of the school.

Links with the parish, schools in the Three Rivers Trust and beyond, together with other partners and community groups are resulting in shared responsibility for the care, well-being and flourishing of all.