

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

St. Francis Church of England Voluntary Aided Junior School	
Scholars Path, Newton Aycliffe, County Durham. DL5 7HB	
Current SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Diocese	Durham
Previous SIAMS inspection grade	Satisfactory
Local authority	Durham
Date of inspection	22 June 2017
Date of last inspection	7-8 November 2012
Type of school and unique reference number	Voluntary Aided 114267
Headteacher	Jane Wilkinson
Inspector's name and number	Mary Cook NS 811

School context

St Francis Church of England Voluntary Aided School is a small junior school situated in the parish of Great Aycliffe. The vast majority of children are of White British background. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils is above average whilst the number of children with special educational needs and disabilities is in line with the national average. Most of children entering the school transfer from the adjacent county infant and nursery school.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Francis CE VA Junior School as a Church of England school are good

- Christian values and practice underpin the life of the school, engaging all the members of the school community, communicating God's love for them and inspiring them in their learning and personal development.
- Well planned and inclusive worship helps to structure the week and contributes greatly to the children's understanding of Christian values such as hope, giving them confidence to try their best in school.
- An able and committed team of adults, led by a transformational headteacher, is working to move the school forward and to develop it as a hub for the local community.

Areas to improve

- Strengthen the religious education (RE) curriculum so that the children learn about a range of religions across the world and have a greater understanding of other faith communities.
- Use the SIAMS Framework to evaluate the provision of RE in order to further improve outcomes for children.
- Build on from the thought-provoking prayer space days by using the ideas on a more regular basis to provide creative and spiritual opportunities for all in school.
- Ensure that the children have the opportunity to explore and discuss the Christian concept of the Holy Trinity so that they can clearly articulate their understanding of the Holy Spirit.

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

The Christian values of hope, wisdom and thankfulness underpin all that the school does to meet the needs of learners. Wisdom is the most pervasive value as the children are continually challenged to make good choices and to use their well-honed reasoning skills. The introduction of 'Ultimate Questions,' a dedicated weekly session devoted to debating wider issues, further promotes philosophical thinking. Discussions such as those about the Bible quote: 'An eye for an eye' show the maturity of the children's thoughts and their empathy towards others.

The headteacher models the mission statement 'to be the best you can be' in her determination that all in school will flourish. The impact is evident in the exemplary behaviour shown in school and the 'can do' attitude that is instilled in the children. There are few instances of bullying and the children assert 'any bullying would be dealt with in ten minutes if we told a teacher.' Attendance is improving and is in line with national expectations.

Excellent relationships exist within school, and further afield with community partners. The school is creating stronger links with the feeder infant school which is transforming the transition process. There is a strong drive for the children to learn the basic skills required to succeed at secondary school, resulting in most pupils making expected progress and some individuals making accelerated progress.

The learning environment promotes Christian values through the celebration of the children's work, with explicit references to core values in the classrooms. Reflection books provide a rich narrative of the way children praise one another for their behaviour and achievements. Throughout school, children are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions and the displays contain prompts to help the children accomplish this objective.

Parents believe the school helps their child to become more respectful, particularly in the promotion of excellent behaviour and support for charitable causes. Raising funds for the Lesotho Garden has raised awareness of the needs of others in developing countries. Other enterprise schemes such as the up-cycling of furniture show the value of Christian stewardship as does the tending of the raised beds and the care for the school's rabbits.

It is difficult for the school to access the parish church due to its geographical location. The local team ministry is supportive of the school and provides worship input on a regular basis.

Since the last SIAS inspection, the school has developed a focal point for reflection in each classroom as recommended and the issues relating to RE assessment have been addressed. The teaching of RE makes a positive contribution to the overall ethos of the school, particularly the moral and social development of learners. However, the school is set to review the syllabus to ensure that there is a deeper understanding of faiths other than Christianity.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good

Worship has a significant impact on the life of the school. It makes a good contribution to the school's ethos, to the expression of its values and to the personal development of learners and adults. The children are very enthusiastic about the 'Open the Book' weekly worship led by the clergy. The role play technique encourages a deeper understanding of Bible stories and helps the children to make connections with their own lives. This is enhanced by a further input from the headteacher who continues the theme in her worship. The activities are engaging and often involve the acting out of traditional stories. The children have opportunities for reflection both in worship at other times during the week. The children show respect during worship, through excellent behaviour, rejoicing in their singing and responding enthusiastically to interactive moments. They readily share stories from their own experience to make sense of the worship theme.

The worship rota is based on Christian values, major Christian festivals and Bible stories, however there is flexibility to reflect local and global needs. Worship is of a broadly Christian nature with the inclusion of Anglican practice such as readings from the Bible and traditional prayers. This provides the children with a good understanding of the major church festivals, but are less confident in their understanding of the Holy Trinity. The pupils struggle to articulate their concept of the Holy Spirit.

Nearly all worship takes place in the school building, however the Year 6 children participate in the Diocesan Leaver's Service at Durham Cathedral. This is highly regarded as the pupils view the service as a rite of passage to secondary school.

Prayers are prepared by the children in each class on a termly basis to be shared prior to lunch and at home time. The pupils speak animatedly about the Prayer Spaces trialled in school. The stimulus of interactive and creative activities provides the opportunity for a prayerful and reflective response. This very much appeals to the children.

The parents very much enjoy the class assemblies as they include all the children whatever their needs or ability, so that they all feel valued. Occasions such as Christmas and Easter celebrations are extremely well supported.

A member of the clergy is keen to build up the children's knowledge about the Last Supper and the Christian tradition of celebrating Holy Communion. Plans are being made to celebrate the Eucharist a number of times during the year. Although there has been some monitoring of worship, there is a need for more robust self-evaluation by governors to determine impact and future priorities.

The effectiveness of the religious education is good.

The school has invested considerable time and energy into the implementation of the Durham Diocesan Syllabus. Teachers work collaboratively across the school to discuss planning and share good practice. This has been extended into reviewing the standard of work achieved and agreeing assessment judgements. The subject leader maintains the school assessment tracking and has an overview of progress and outcomes. Standards achieved are in line with core subjects such as English. Pupils progress well in their learning about Christianity and are able to talk in some depth about symbols associated with Jesus. The teaching has been strengthened by visits to both the parish and local Methodist churches. The quality of teaching is good with some outstanding elements. In the best lessons children are challenged to think more deeply and to articulate their thoughts clearly. The learners value the written feedback given to them in RE books, and they willingly respond to additional tasks.

There is some rigidity in the use of the syllabus in that activities are often taught in the exact way described in the document. There is scope to make changes so that the approach reflects normal school practice which encourages more interaction. The school environment reflects the importance of RE to the school with some dedicated display space celebrating the children's thoughts and work. Displays highlight the research undertaken into the life of St Francis and contain reflections from the children about his life.

The two year curriculum cycle includes a composite unit drawing on some aspects of Hinduism. There is also a short unit on the Jewish Passover. The school uses online virtual tours to illustrate other places of worship such as a synagogue. Given the context of the school, there are few families which can be called upon to share traditions from faiths other than Christianity. The children have some understanding about major world faiths and associated culture, however there is no discrete teaching about Islam. The school has identified this as an area to be developed and intends revise the curriculum accordingly.

The RE subject leader is developing her role and increasing in confidence; she undertakes lesson observations and work scrutinies on a regular basis. The revised assessment system provides the teachers with a list of expected outcomes for each year group. This helps to shape the planning and ensures progression across the school. Summary statements on RE are passed on to the governing body via the headteacher rather than the subject leader so opportunities for open discussion, and planning for the next steps of development are missed.

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

The headteacher, staff and governors place Christian values and ethos at the heart of this school and remain true to their vision even in times of changing staffing. Several members of staff have been on leave from school, but this has not affected day to day operations or school ethos. The headteacher is inspirational in terms of expressing a desire for all to 'be the best they can be'. She has an inner strength attributed to personal resilience and creativity, both of which can be viewed as Christian characteristics. Both the headteacher and governors are mindful that the school serves a school population that is mainly agnostic. However, the invitational approach to parents to join in with collective worship reaps dividends as celebrations are seen as a highlight of the school year.

The school continues to build on strategies that they know work well, such as building on the theme of Christian hope and expressing this in terms of aspirations for the future. The excellent relationships within the school family reflect the values modelled by the caring and attentive staff. The children feel safe and valued as individuals; they enjoy school and the wide range of activities offered. The individual attention given to each child in terms of verbal and written feedback helps them to know they are valued. Care and attention is given to curriculum planning to ensure it is as relevant as possible to the children. Lessons are modified to encourage the highest possible engagement from learners, but this is yet to be extended to the RE syllabus.

Governors regularly visit the school and believe they have a good feel for the distinctive ethos, however this is not formally evaluated. The governors have enrolled for training on the SIAMS framework to improve their understanding and self-evaluation.

The RE subject leader is developing confidence and undertakes some formal monitoring of the subject. Both she and the headteacher have identified gaps in RE provision particularly relating to the teaching of other world faiths such as Islam. The school intends to review the syllabus to ensure this aspect is addressed.

The school meets the statutory requirements for both collective worship and RE. There is a clear understanding of the need to develop future church school leaders, and the headteacher is proactive in supporting staff in leadership training. Staff absence has provided the ideal opportunity for less experienced colleagues to take on acting leadership roles.

Partnership working is very evident in supporting children who are known to be vulnerable. There is an effective working relationship with social services and other welfare agencies.

Parents are supportive of and involved in school life. They speak very positively of the care and support given to their children and value the Christian aspects of the school such as the emphasis on teaching hope and respect for one another.