

National Society Statutory Inspection of Anglican Schools

Debenham Church of England Voluntary Controlled High School

Gracechurch Street
Debenham
Stowmarket
Suffolk
IP14 6BL

Diocese: St Edmundsbury and Ipswich

Local Authority: Suffolk
Date of inspection: 26 February 2008
Date of last inspection: November 2001
School's unique reference number: 124860
Principal : Mr Michael Crawshaw OBE
Inspector's name and number: Betty Barratt 203

School context

The school is smaller than most 11-16 year old secondary schools and serves a rural area of North Suffolk. The great majority of its pupils are from White British backgrounds and the level of socio-economic disadvantage is below that found nationally. The proportion eligible for free school meals is well below average. A significant number of pupils have learning difficulties and disabilities, and the number with statements of special educational needs is above average. The school has been a specialist science college since 2005 and is regularly over-subscribed. The parish church is about ten minutes walk away.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of Debenham Church of England School as a Church of England School are outstanding

The exceptionally strong Christian ethos which permeates the school inspires excellent relationships, and very positive values and attitudes to teaching and learning. Pupils thrive in a happy and secure environment and make outstanding progress. They respond very well to the high expectations for their achievement and behaviour, and their care and respect for one another. An exceptionally wide and varied range of out of school activities enriches their learning, and their confidence and self-esteem are boosted by encouragement and reward. Adults are excellent role models.

Established strengths

- The deep commitment of the principal, staff and governors to promoting a strong Christian vision for the school
- The very strong Christian ethos which enables pupils to flourish personally and academically.
- The excellent relationships and pupils' respect for others
- The outstanding support for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Focus for development

- Increase the opportunities for pupils to worship in church
- Improve pupils' knowledge of Anglican faith and practices.

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

The school's very strong Christian ethos results in all pupils being helped to flourish as individuals and to achieve their best. Pupils feel valued and secure in a welcoming and orderly environment. The excellent relationships between them and their teachers, and between adults, enable them to make outstanding progress personally and academically. Pupils are happy, confident, articulate, and very well-behaved. Those who come from other schools settle quickly, and any previous behaviour problems are often soon resolved. Pupils are proud of their school and relish joining its exceptionally wide-ranging activities including the many lunch time and after school clubs which include sport, music, art, mathematics and Latin. They value the many opportunities they have to take responsibility and contribute their ideas about school life through, for example, being Head Boy, Head Girl, prefects, peer mentors and members of the School Council. They are especially proud of the contribution they are making to the development of a garden in memory of a teacher who died recently. Pupils are very caring, considerate and helpful to one another. Peer mentors play an important role in supporting those who are experiencing problems. Pupils are also sensitive to the needs of those in the wider community, raising money for many charities including Macmillan Cancer Care Support, and giving strong support for Fairtrade. Their support for the latter has been instrumental in changing the Local Authority policy on Fairtrade goods being sold in school dining rooms. The rich and varied learning experiences provide outstanding support for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Their spiritual development is further supported by vibrant and attractive displays including the high quality textile wall hangings in the entrance hall and corridors. The cross in assemblies, the painting of the baptism of Jesus in the entrance hall, the stained glass windows designed by pupils in the library, and messages throughout the school reflecting the importance of respect for one another, are constant reminders of the school's Christian values.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good

Collective Worship is regarded as being very important in the life of the school and has a significant impact on promoting the school's Christian vision and pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Assemblies are carefully planned and regularly evaluated through feedback from staff and pupils, with findings informing development planning. The worship table and cross in the school hall, are clear reminders of the Christian nature of assemblies. The sense of occasion is emphasised by the gathering of the whole school and the key role played by the principal and senior staff in leading worship with prefects sitting alongside them. Special services are organised for the celebration of Easter, and anniversaries such as Remembrance Day and the Holocaust Memorial Day. The leavers and commemoration services are seen as very important in celebrating pupils' achievement, and always include the school prayer and hymn. Christmas is celebrated in the parish church, but this is the only opportunity the school arranges for pupils to worship in the church.

All pupils and staff participate fully in worship. Staff value the opportunity for the school to gather as a family to reflect and share values at the beginning of the day. Pupils listen attentively, enjoy music and Bible readings, and join reverently in reflection and prayer. Pupils contribute regularly to worship often taking part in the weekly Bible readings, dramatic presentations, and playing in the school orchestra at Christmas carol services including those in the church. Pupils wrote the school prayer which is included in their personal log books. Parents say that their children enjoy assemblies and often talk about the themes of those they have recently attended.

The Rector, together with other local clergy both Anglican and from other denominations, play a key role in supporting the school's worship and regularly lead school assemblies. Pupils relate well to the Rector and the other visitors, and many enjoy the meetings of the philosophy group organised by the Rector. They have sound knowledge of the major Christian festivals, and but know little of Anglican faith and practices, including liturgy and the pattern of church services. The school is to address this issue through introducing Eucharist services in partnership with the Rector.

The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding

Religious education is regarded as being of great importance. It makes an outstanding contribution to promoting the Christian character of the school, supporting pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, and in enabling all pupils to achieve very well. GCSE results are outstanding. Teaching and learning are excellent. Pupils enjoy the subject and recognise its relevance to their own lives. Year 10 pupils responded extremely well to the teacher's high expectations and challenge for them to discuss and present opposing views about abortion. They worked very well together in groups, listening to, and respecting each other's views, and presenting cogent ideas of their own. Their learning was strongly supported by the teacher's knowledgeable and clear presentations, and searching questions which helped them to develop their thinking. Excellent classroom relationships resulted in a very positive learning ethos. Discussion plays a prominent part in deepening pupils' understanding and helping them to explore issues. An 'Any Questions?' Panel for instance, enables pupils in Years 10 and 11 to discuss religious and moral issues with adults representing other faiths. Learning is also enriched by strong links with the diocese and many visits to broaden their learning. For example, Year 11 students visit a synagogue to extend their understanding of other faiths, and Year 7 pupils visit Sizewell Hall to help them to explore ethical issues in the context of Christian values.

The effectiveness of religious education is kept under review systematically by department self-evaluation procedures which inform development planning. Local clergy and lay members make an important contribution to ensuring that religious education is accorded appropriate status in the school's curriculum. The subject leader is highly respected as a senior member of staff, and all pupils follow the GCSE Short Course in Years 10 and 11.

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

The principal's deep Christian faith and dedication to promoting the school's Christian character, permeates the whole school. The school's Christian purpose is clearly expressed in its mission statement and aims, and staff are made fully aware of the Christian nature of the school at the time of their appointment. Staff feel highly valued and are deeply committed to the achievement of the head teacher's vision for the school as a church school. They regard his leadership and commitment highly, and appreciate being consulted regularly about putting the school's vision into practice. Staff are excellent role models in the way their values are reflected in their daily lives. The school's admission policy is fully inclusive, and the Christian message made available to all families. The foundation governors, who include the Rector, have a clear view of their role, and are deeply committed to promoting the school's distinctive Christian character and vision. They work closely with the school as critical friends, questioning and identifying areas to be further developed. Staff and parents are involved in monitoring and evaluating the school's achievements including its vision as a church school. Parents respond well to questionnaires and greatly appreciate the school's Christian ethos. They value the excellent care for individual pupils, the strong focus on respect, and the partnership with parents. The school's status as specialist science college is supporting the achievement of the school's Christian vision well through the new 21st Century Science curriculum which focuses on moral and ethical issues.

There are close links and a strong working partnership with the parish church and diocese,. The principal plays a key role in the diocese as Chairman of the Diocesan Board of Education, and members of the diocese including the Diocesan Education Officer and Bishops, make an important contribution to school life. The Rector visits the school regularly in addition to taking assemblies and attending functions. Members of local team of Anglican clergy have adopted the role of school chaplain at times of need, for example, when a member of the school community died. The school supports church events and fundraising, for MENCAP for instance, and the principal leads worship in the church and reads at the parish carol service.