

National Society Statutory Inspection of Anglican Schools Report

St. Mary's Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School

Burkitt Road
Woodbridge
Suffolk
IP12 4JJ

Diocese: St. Edmundsbury and Ipswich

Local authority: Suffolk

Dates of inspection: 19th and 20th February 2008

Date of last inspection: November 2003

School's unique reference number: 124773

Headteacher: Mr. Alister Gourlay

Inspector's name and number: Mrs. Ann Williams

School Context

St. Mary's VA Primary School is situated on the edge of the town of Woodbridge, with 207 learners in seven classes, each of a single age group. It draws the vast majority of its pupils from white British families who live in the local area. There is an admissions policy which gives priority to local residents and to those who worship at the parish church. Very few children are entitled to free school meals, and the number of pupils with learning difficulties is below average.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St. Mary's Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School as a Church of England school are outstanding.

There is a very strong Christian ethos underpinning the life of the school, where adults and children are encouraged to support and care for one another. Learners feel secure and happy in the calm and caring atmosphere of the school, and have an obvious pride in it. They achieve well, and their accomplishments are celebrated in many ways. Staff in the school feel valued and well-supported, and are excellent role models.

Established Strengths

- The leadership team of the school is committed to promoting the distinctive Christian character of the school.
- The strong emphasis on mutual respect and support ensures that learners feel secure and confident. They are articulate and their behaviour is excellent.
- The emphasis on caring for one another is demonstrated in excellent relationships between staff, between learners and adults and between learners.
- Learners are proud of their school and value their participation in its daily life

Focus for Development

- To implement the new county syllabus for religious education in September 2008.
- To introduce a religious education enrichment week.
- To establish a school/home prayer chain.

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

The school's strong Christian ethos provides a calm and reflective atmosphere in which all learners feel secure and are able to flourish. Learners are encouraged to do their best and their academic achievements are above the national average. They are proud of their own and others' achievements, which are celebrated in a variety of ways.

Nurture groups enable the less confident to work more informally with individual support, and the recent Ofsted inspection found that 'pupils with learning difficulties are extremely well supported.'

The relationships between all members of the school community are excellent and learners talk enthusiastically about the kindness of the staff and the care they receive from everyone. Parents are satisfied that disputes are very rare and are always settled quickly and fairly, with the emphasis on forgiveness. Quiet areas for personal reflection and the opportunity to discuss issues with peers during 'circle time' are valued by all learners.

Lessons are carefully planned and differentiated, and assessments note in detail each child's strengths and weaknesses, with staff knowing each pupil as an individual. The recent Ofsted report commented on the outstanding personal development of all learners.

There is a wealth of activities both at lunchtimes and after school, the emphasis being more on teamwork than on personal excellence. The annual school productions also enable learners to be part of a team.

Emphasis is placed on caring for others, both within the school and in the wider community. Year Six children respond well to their responsibility at break as play leaders and at lunchtimes as table leaders. Gifts from the annual Harvest Festival are distributed by the children to the elderly in almshouses nearby, and learners are encouraged to maintain contact with the residents.

Year Five pupils take part in a residential 'African Experience', which immerses them in the problems involved in day to day living in such a community. This encourages them to raise money to buy water filters for African villages. There are also whole school events to raise money for many good causes.

Elected School Council representatives are aware of the importance of their role, and their responsibility for spending a budget of £1000 to help make the school even better. They have so far purchased special bins to enable Early Years pupils to take care of the environment more easily.

To promote thought and discussion, there are, around the school, displays of colourful work and religious artefacts, and, at the entrance, is the school blessing and an embroidered quilt depicting various stories from the Bible.

Children are encouraged to eat healthily and the school is working towards Healthy Schools Status.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding.

Collective worship is intrinsic to the life of the school. A range of styles is used and learners sit facing a table covered by a handmade cloth embroidered with Christian symbols. Two candles are lit by monitors before learners enter to the sound of reflective music. They are quiet and attentive as the message, appropriate to their level of understanding, is delivered. They enjoy participating by reading and singing, and appreciate the diversity offered by a variety of visitors who come to lead the assembly. Time for personal reflection and prayer at the end is respectfully observed by all, and worship closes with everyone saying the school blessing. Time is given to talking about the Christian message during the day and learners are appreciative of the opportunity to offer personal concerns for prayer.

Collective worship is well-planned and resourced, with a prescribed budget. All staff are involved in planning, monitoring and delivery, and learners enjoy visiting each other's rooms for pupil-led class assemblies. Foundation Governors regularly attend to monitor collective worship and reports are made to the whole governing body.

Learners respond well and remember positively what is told to them. For example, parents tell of their children discussing the story of Joseph and the message of forgiveness when they are at home. The local rector leads the act of worship on a regular basis. Special services to celebrate Christian festivals, to which parents and members of the local community are invited, are held in the church. An annual school Easter Eucharist has been introduced and the rector visits the school to explain the symbolism and the artefacts that will be used during the Eucharist. Learners appreciate being able to play a full part in this service.

Prayers at lunchtime and at the end of the day help the children be aware of God's presence in their daily life.

The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding.

Religious education plays a significant part in the school curriculum. Parents of new entrants are made aware of its importance when they visit the school. That the children of non-Christian families are not withdrawn is a tribute to the sympathetic way in which the subject is taught. The head, as RE co-ordinator, monitors and evaluates the content and the teaching of RE. He prepares a report for the governing body, and a foundation governor has specific responsibility for RE. Teachers regularly assess learners' achievements and report to parents in the same way as for other subjects. The time allocation, presently averaging well in excess of one hour per week, will be further enhanced in the autumn term with the implementation of a religious education enrichment week.

The county syllabus, used at present, has been updated and will be implemented in September 2008. The diocesan education officer supports the planning of RE, and is closely involved in the training of staff. Lessons are well prepared and taught by individual class teachers, using a range of strategies and resources. Learners have the opportunity to interact and discuss the topic, as well as completing written tasks, which are carefully differentiated.

Learners enjoy religious education, some stating that it is their favourite subject, and are confident in the knowledge that they achieve at least as well as in other subjects. They have a wide knowledge of Bible stories in the early years, where the main emphasis is on Christianity. Year two, who were learning about the significance of stories and sayings, were able to apply them to their daily life. When asked the meaning of the phrase 'God is the potter', learners offered 'He makes us into something beautiful'.

Christianity continues to be studied in depth, alongside other world religions, in Key Stage 2. The children have a wide experience of the Church and the seasons of the Christian year, together with a good understanding of the symbolism used. The local church and clergy are used as a valuable resource, and year four children responded well to the lesson about the Church's seasons led by the local curate.

Together with the study of other world religions, pupils learn to be tolerant, in their daily life, of the differences of others. They learn, too, to appreciate the similarities between Christianity and other faiths.

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

The self-evaluation of the school in judging itself to be outstanding is accurate and upheld by the evidence in place in the school.

The leadership team is wholly committed to ensuring that the distinctive Christian nature of the school is given paramount importance. That Christian values underpin all that the school represents and achieves is clearly stated within its aims and in all its publicity.

The headteacher gives a strong and overtly Christian lead and he is highly respected by staff, governors, pupils and parents alike. All staff feel highly valued and there is mutual respect within the whole of the school community. Staff are also Christian role models for the children, and learners respond positively to the caring Christian ethos and the high expectations for achievement and behaviour.

Parents appreciate the strong lead from the head, and the regular communication they receive from the school. They commented that the fortnightly newsletter contains not only school notices, but details of church and community events also. New parents have the opportunity to meet informally over coffee with the head and governors soon after their child has joined the school, and there are other opportunities for all parents to meet both formally and informally to discuss any issues.

There is a flourishing Friends' Group, supported by parents, staff and the local community, which organises a variety of events. The school building is also used for community events in the evening.

The governing body is supportive of the school and of the head. Their regular meetings open with prayer and governors are diligent in carrying out their responsibilities. Foundation governors are a source of inspiration and support, and are aware of their role in questioning and identifying areas for development. They visit during the school day, to monitor collective worship and to work alongside staff and pupils. They represent the school on their respective Parochial Church Councils, and have secured funding from the local church for books presented to year six children at their leavers' service. The local parish priest is an ex officio member of the governing body, and considers all members of the school community to be part of his flock. He is a frequent visitor to the school, in addition to the times when he leads collective worship, and his support is greatly appreciated. The governors value the headteacher's experience and are aware of their responsibility in appointing his successor for the new school year.