

National Society Statutory Inspection of Anglican Schools Report

St Nicolas Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School

Boxhill Walk

Abingdon

OX14 1HB

Diocese of Oxford

Local Authority: Oxfordshire

Dates of inspection: 26th February 2009

Date of last inspection: 21st November 2005

School's Unique reference number: 123166

Name of Headteacher: Richard Furniss

Inspector's name and NS inspector's number: Lyn Field NS151

Context

This large primary school is the only Church of England school serving the town of Abingdon. Almost all pupils are of White British heritage and the proportion eligible for free school meals is below average. There are fewer pupils than usual with learning difficulties but the difficulties they experience are significant and often affect their behaviour and emotional development. There have been significant changes of staff since the previous inspection and both the headteacher and deputy are new in post.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Nicolas as a Church of England school are good

The Christian ethos has a clear role in how the school prepares children for the future. Pupils grow into mature and confident members of the community who value the place of faith in their lives. A strong leadership team ensures that Christian values are lived out in relationships and underpin the care of children and their families.

Established strengths

- The school's leaders and governors have clear aims for the school as a church school.
- Relationships are rooted in the Christian values of honesty and trust.
- Links with various churches in the town give pupils experience of the wider church community.
- The well-being of staff, children and families has a high priority.

Focus for development

- To ensure that curriculum planning consistently identifies opportunities for spiritual development including resources for pupils to use independently
- To monitor progress as a church school by using the school's distinctively Christian aims as benchmarks to compare with the pupils' views of worship.

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

Honesty and trust characterise relationships throughout the school and all members of staff model these qualities. This creates an atmosphere in which pupils achieve their best both academically and socially although there is some inconsistency in how they tackle spiritual issues. Pupils understand what is distinctively Christian about values such as forgiveness and stewardship and give examples from the life and teaching of Jesus. This underpins their good behaviour and the way they work well together. The youngest pupils, for example, speak with candour and sensitivity about how they help pupils with specific difficulties to join, as fully as possible, in school life. The Keyway project is outstanding in raising the aspirations and self-esteem of Year 6 pupils because staff tutors are skilled in nurturing children at the same time as challenging them to develop mature working relationships. A typical comment from pupils was 'we have had to learn to trust people who are not necessarily our best friends'. The school's pastoral care has a strong Christian basis. It embraces children, adults and families especially where loss and grief is experienced. Pupils

grow in spiritual awareness through the links teachers make between subjects and the introduction of more reflective learning initiatives such as 'Godly Play'. However, this is not monitored for consistency and pupils have limited resources to use independently in classrooms. Religious education lessons have the unanimous support of pupils. They believe it is important to understand the different faiths they will encounter beyond school. Year 6 pupils, for example, were particularly enthusiastic about the insights they had gained from their visit to a mosque.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good

Worship makes a clear link for pupils between Christianity and the social and moral issues they face in everyday life. This is because themes are carefully planned and led by the staff and local clergy to link with what pupils are learning in other areas of the curriculum. Year 2 pupils, for example, know the significance of Ash Wednesday and Lent and go further in explaining that Jesus found his task on earth difficult and how they support each other in not giving up. Parents are pleased their children learn that the meaning of festivals such as Christmas and Easter is about more than material gifts and this points to the spiritual benefits of worship. The school has developed times of quiet reflection in response to issues raised in the previous inspection. Younger pupils respond well to these because they are given a clear focus for their thoughts. Whilst older pupils use prayer to help them make 'the right decision' they are less confident in how to use times of silence for their own personal use. Assemblies led by classes in turn are extremely popular and successfully convey the school's core values. Older pupils take full responsibility in preparing and delivering the material and their enthusiasm engages other pupils who remember the message because it is fun to watch. This does not detract from the specific element of worship within assemblies and pupils are clear that time to pray and focus on the candle is a regular part of what happens. Governors have discussed the place of worship as part of the regular review of policies and support the school's plans to introduce a special Easter service. However, it is the recent survey of pupils' views on worship that is particularly helpful in giving clear direction to where improvement is needed. This is because good questions prompt open and reflective responses and indicate which features of worship pupils find most helpful.

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

The school has very distinctive aims as a church school that are sharply focused on how Christian values prepare children for the future. Decisions made by the headteacher and senior staff show how they are developing a curriculum in line with this vision. However, the best use is not made of these aims as benchmarks in monitoring either the school's effectiveness or its progress since the last inspection. As a result there are missed opportunities to recognise the good impact of the school's Christian character on pupils and the school has rightly identified this as an area to address. The school's leadership team is strong and skilled in selecting initiatives that address the needs of pupils and staff. The training programme pays attention to both the personal and professional development of all staff and this results in effective teamwork. The parent prayer group provides constant spiritual support for the school. Teachers feel supported in teaching RE and in leading worship because the co-ordinator keeps abreast of developments in these areas and is effective in sharing good practice with staff. However some projects, such as Godly play, are at an early stage and pupils in different classes do not have equal experience of them. The school puts considerable effort into special events that help pupils to grow up with a sense of belonging to the wider church. Services in churches of different denominations, the celebration of St Nicolas Day and fundraising for charities motivated by the Christian faith are examples of how pupils learn about community life. The pastoral support of the Baptist minister is valued and the foundation governors are working to develop a closer relationship with the new rector of St Nicolas, once this appointment is made.