

National Society Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools Report

St Michael's Church of England Aided First School

Howling Lane
Alnwick
NE66 1DJ

Previous SIAMS grade: Outstanding

Diocese: Newcastle

Local authority: Northumberland

Dates of inspection: 10 June 2015

Date of last inspection: 21 June 2010

School's unique reference number: 122280

Headteacher: Gavin Johnson

Inspector's name and number: Canon Brian Hedley NS619

School context

St Michael's serves the market town of Alnwick and the surrounding rural areas. A number of families travel from out of catchment, choosing this school because of its faith status. There have been significant staffing changes over the last three years. The current head teacher was appointed in January 2014. Northumberland County Council and the Alnwick Partnership of schools are consulting on possible options for re-organisation in this part of Northumberland.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Michael's as a Church of England school are good

- A pro-active leadership and governance team keep Christian values at the heart of school life and use them to constantly drive aspirations forward
- High-quality collective worship and a range of other opportunities provide effectively for prayer and reflection; they develop the spiritual life of the school, its individual members and the community very well
- The religious education (RE) curriculum helps pupils to think more deeply about their own spiritual development and their response to living in a diverse world
- Partnerships between school, home and parish are strong and productive

Areas to improve

- Further improve the feedback in RE to help pupils know next steps for learning and sharpen the mapping of progress
- Include the impact of the school's chosen core values on raising achievement in overviews of performance

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

Christian love, a genuine commitment to one another and a non-judgemental attitude pervade life at St Michael's at all levels. This is because the teachings of Christ are at the centre of relationships and actions reflected in the school's motto: 'Learning to Love – Loving to Learn.' As one child explained: 'Our core Christian values inspire us to care for everyone; they give us the courage to try hard and to be proud of our achievements'.

Much is being done at St Michael's to raise aspirations. The curriculum is constantly under review, and together with a range of extra-curricular clubs the school works to respond to the needs of all children. Despite the recent success of strategies for improvement, there remain variations in outcomes in different year groups. However adults are working hard to meet the needs of all pupils; they give extra-special attention to those from local areas of significant deprivation and who are recognised as being vulnerable. As a result of thoughtful intervention from staff and support and friendship from their classmates, those with special needs blossom. Children are able to make links between the school's core Christian values and the decisions they make. Parents confirm that the school's ethos also has a positive impact outside the school gates. One said that collective worship and RE 'help pupils develop a sense of community', another, that children are able to, 'give each other courage to do things', and a third that, 'our children learn how to help others along the way'.

The school strives to ensure that pupils understand faiths and cultures found locally, regionally and globally. This includes visits to places of worship found in the nearest city to the school such as the Gurdwara and Mosque. Fundraising for a huge range of charities and joint working with the local church family develops an understanding of those with different needs, builds links, and makes a significant contribution to pupils' moral and social development.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

Daily worship is distinctively Christian, well-planned, delivered and evaluated, and reflects Anglican traditions. Its high priority results in significant impact upon the spiritual development of the whole school community. A two-year cycle of themes based on the church's year expands pupils' understanding of Christian beliefs, especially in relation to the person of Jesus and God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Pupils speak confidently about the way in which worship enriches their lives; they tell about important moments of learning, celebration, reflection, and times of stillness and prayer. In response to the question: How has worship helped you? one pupil said, 'I may be small but I can achieve big things with God'. Another said, 'I like that we get together as one big group but we also have a reflection corner in our classrooms so we can go and pray on our own if we want to'.

A number of pupils said how much they looked forward to the times when it was their turn to lead worship, especially on the days that family and friends were invited. They talked about how it was a time for 'everyone to think', but also that they loved all the different elements such as singing, drama, listening to Bible stories, lighting candles and singing the Trinity Song. Several mentioned how special they felt when invited out to the front to share their own personal prayers during worship. Others said that they looked forward to the lighting of the three candles and the Christian greetings they share, spoken in different languages and sign language at the start of worship every day.

The close relationship with the parish church and regular involvement of the vicar and curate means that learners and their families have further enriching opportunities and high-quality experiences which contribute well to their spiritual development and well-being.

There are excellent systems for evaluating the effectiveness of worship, some of which are the proud responsibility of the pupils themselves. Files of information provide evidence of the impact worship has on the different age-ranges in the school, on adults, and those who visit. This information will be useful in the school's constant drive to improve, and should form part of regular feedback to the full Governing Body on the effectiveness of their Worship Policy.

The effectiveness of the religious education is good

Religious Education is given the same importance as other 'core subjects'. Since governors adopted the relatively new diocesan syllabus, a very capable and enthusiastic co-ordinator has led staff through a series of adaptations to better meet the needs of learners. As a result, teachers are developing much greater confidence in subject knowledge and when challenging pupils to think more profoundly. The recent introduction of 'the purple pen' to move learning on in RE is a significant and timely step forward. Teachers put a good deal of effort into marking pupils' work and the growing practice of writing reflective comments about their RE responses (as opposed to literacy) is to be applauded. However, learners must be given time at the start of every lesson to read and take action, because only then will this useful strategy really help them to improve their work and deepen their thinking.

Most pupils appear to make good progress within lessons. However it is not yet possible to judge long-term progress given the new syllabus and associated assessment.

Conversations reveal that pupils enjoy RE lessons and are able to relate learning to their own personal experiences. They are confident when explaining what the Christian faith means to them; many showed an ability to relate to and empathise with people in the local community. This is carefully balanced with learning about others' faiths and respecting those who choose to follow none. The 'Floor Books' show that pupils are developing many of the higher-level skills which help in the development of their own personal convictions and beliefs.

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

The Head teacher, leaders and governors are steadfast in their drive and determination to raise academic standards whilst sensitively providing for the personal development of every child. They are crystal clear about the school's Christian character and ensure that core values are at the heart of decision-making and action; they believe this will make a significant impact on learners' achievements and well-being. 'Learning to Love, Loving to Learn' sums up agreed priorities.

Governors are well led, provide solid support, give direction, offer challenge and hold senior leaders to account. They could be even more robust if the impact of the school's chosen core values on raising achievement was quantified and fed into overviews of performance; any reports to the full governing body could be cross-referenced to the descriptors in the Evaluation Schedule for added benefit.

The high profile of collective worship and RE ensures that the school readily meets the expectations of the National Society's 'Statement of Entitlement'. Careful planning and delivery enable children to apply what they have learned across other areas of the curriculum and outside the school day. Parents are proud to reflect on the compliments paid to children by members of the public as a direct result of the respect, tolerance and care they show at home and further afield.

Continuing professional development of staff and governors allied to the identified priorities for school improvement keeps everyone accountable and fully aware of their roles and responsibilities. This too is contributing hugely towards the success of the leadership and management of the school.

Links with the parish church, the Alnwick partnership of schools and other organisations are a key strength. Children, parents, governors and staff say that these fruitful relationships engender a greater sense of community and joint responsibility for one another.