

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

The Abbey Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School

Grove Road, St Albans, Hertfordshire, AL1 1DQ

Current SIAMS inspection grade Outstanding

Diocese St Albans

Previous SIAMS inspection grade Outstanding

Date/s of inspection 9 May 2018

Date of last inspection 26 June 2013

Type of school and unique reference number Voluntary Aided 117449

Headteacher Emma Fenn

Inspector's name and number Rachel Peddie 934

School context

The Abbey CE VA Primary School lies in the heart of St Albans directly alongside St Albans Abbey. The school is of average size with 210 pupil on roll and is popular and oversubscribed. The majority of pupils are from White British backgrounds and there are few pupils with English as an additional language.

There are small numbers of children with special educational needs and the proportion of disadvantaged pupils eligible for additional funding known as the pupil premium is well below average. There have been some changes in teaching and support staff since the last inspection.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of The Abbey Primary School as a Church of England school are outstanding

- The strong and long-standing partnership between the school and local clergy at St Albans Abbey results in the pupils' excellent understanding of the Christian faith and Anglican practice.
- The school's vision and Christian values are deeply embedded at all levels of the school's practice and results in high standards of academic achievement, behaviour and personal well-being for all pupils.
- Strong and effective practice in religious education (RE) ensures that children have considerable knowledge of world religions, most notably Christianity, its teachings and practices.

Areas to improve

- Deepen children's understanding of non-Christian world faiths and beliefs in RE lessons so that they have a greater understanding of global and cultural diversity.
- Develop the opportunities pupils have to plan and lead their own independent acts of collective worship so that they can fully demonstrate their extensive knowledge of Christian worship.

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

The distinctive Christian character and ethos of Abbey Primary School are strikingly apparent from the very first moment a visitor arrives. Much work has been undertaken over the last two years to revise and sharpen the school's vision and values under the over-arching line 'We learn, we care, we achieve'. Describing the school's motto, one child explained, 'it means that if we work hard with our learning and always make sure we care for each other like God does, then we will achieve well in our lives'. Christian values are lived out daily by all members of the school community; they underpin all areas of the school's work and are explicitly understood and articulated by children, staff and parents. Staff explain how the values underpin the school's approach to behaviour and attitudes to learning meaning that pupils always feel fairly treated. Creative displays around the school reflect the high standard of children's learning experiences at Abbey Primary. Their learning is enhanced further by the use of the school's beautiful outdoor environment, utilising the school grounds and unique setting to teach children about the stewardship of God's world. Pupils at The Abbey Primary achieve highly across the curriculum and have done so for a sustained period of time. This is because each child is valued as an individual and staff are successful in their commitment to ensuring their varying needs are met. The curriculum is wide and varied which contributes significantly to children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC). This is particularly the case with music, which is considered to be the 'life-blood of the school'. Music is threaded throughout the curriculum through instrumental lessons, orchestra and outstanding singing, especially in acts of worship. A number of pupils are choristers at The Abbey, inspired by their school experiences. As a result of the school's emphasis on Christian values, relationships between all members of the community are highly positive and the behaviour of all children is exemplary. Pupils show the utmost care and compassion for one another, for example through the 'special friends' scheme where older pupils act as buddies for younger children in school. There is a genuine warmth and care shown to everyone with staff describing this as 'a family feel – like a warm blanket that wraps around everyone here'. Parents are fully involved in the life of the school and embrace its Christian character. They are aware of how the school provides a nurturing and caring environment, rooted in the Christian faith, in which children feel safe and loved. Many parents actively choose the school based on its strong Christian ethos. Strong teaching and learning in religious education (RE) contributes richly to pupils' SMSC development; they have an excellent knowledge and understanding of Christianity. The school has rightly identified that children's understanding of diverse faiths and cultures could be deepened further in RE and this work is well underway. The Christian foundations of The Abbey Primary are deeply entwined in every aspect of the school's daily work and as one member of the clergy accurately summarised, 'the Christian character is the DNA of this place - it's in the soil here'.

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

Worship at The Abbey Primary is central to the school day bringing the whole school community together in an atmosphere of reverence and praise. Pupils develop a good understanding of the life and teachings of Jesus and the Christian belief in God as three in one through distinctively Christian worship. Pupils talk confidently about key times in the Christian calendar such as Advent and Epiphany. A weekly worship is held at St Albans Abbey led by the sub-dean. This is very well attended by parents and the children speak of it being a very special point of the school week when they go to 'their abbey'. Pupils engage with worship enthusiastically and are very keen to participate in key roles, such as reading the week's passage of scripture and carrying the school prayer box to the altar for a blessing. The pupils' elected 'faith council' meets regularly to discuss worship and suggest changes, many of these ideas being incorporated into future planning. Whilst pupils have a number of opportunities to actively participate in worship, they have not yet begun to plan and lead acts of worship independently. The very strong and long established partnership between the school and clergy along with inspirational, moving worship in the cathedral provides children with high quality Christian worship on a regular basis and as a result, pupils have an exceptional knowledge and understanding of Anglican practice. Children talk of the Eucharist services which are held termly describing them as 'a time when we remember the blood and body of Jesus who died to save us all'. Children clearly enjoy worship and speak of it being 'a time when we come together as one to pray and sing to God'. Worship held in the school is carefully planned to link with the weekly service in the cathedral. Pupils experience a range of adults leading worship in school including those from other faith groups and this widens their understanding of different styles of worship. Systematic monitoring and evaluation of worship by pupils, clergy, staff and governors have led to a number of improvements since the last inspection and statutory requirements are met. Pupils show a mature depth to their understanding of prayer and spirituality and make good use of the reflection and prayer spaces in and around school. They talk confidently about what it means to pray: 'it's a time to talk to God from our heart and ask him for help' and 'we listen to God's advice because he will make us stronger'. Parents praise the school's development of children's spirituality, describing times when their children have prayed for each other at home.

The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding.

Religious education has a high profile in the school as a core subject. Standards of attainment are high with the vast majority of pupils meeting or exceeding age related expectations. The committed and knowledgeable subject leader for RE has led significant developments over the last two years. This has included a complete revision of the scheme of work for RE to incorporate the new locally agreed syllabus and the Understanding Christianity units. Alongside this, a new system for assessment and tracking children's progress was introduced in September 2017. As a result of this considerable work, RE lessons are engaging for pupils with creative approaches to encourage debate and inquiry, for example through 'big questions'. In one classroom, the interactive display of pupils' responses to the question 'Is God real?' showed deep and considered thoughts from the children. Pupils enjoy RE and are enthusiastic about activities 'where there isn't a right or wrong answer, it's just what we think'.

Learning fits closely alongside the school's Christian values. For example, pupils can describe how the story of David and Goliath fits with the value of courage and how the story of Moses teaches about trust. Pupils have a very secure knowledge and understanding of Christianity and they have a sound knowledge of other world faiths. Discussing why learning about other religions is important, one child explained that 'in later life if I meet people of different faiths, I will understand them and be respectful'. The teaching of other faiths is enriched with a '3 Faiths Tour' trip and visitors from other religious groups are welcomed into school to talk to children about their faith.

RE contributes significantly to the SMSC development of pupils of all ages. However, because the pupils' knowledge and experience of Christianity is so strong and the school community is predominantly Christian, their understanding of other world faiths, by comparison, is less secure. This has already been identified by the RE leader as an area to develop further. The quality of RE is monitored and evaluated systematically by senior leaders, the RE subject leader and governors. The views of pupils and parents feed into this evaluation through regular questionnaires, feedback and pupil voice activities. Good links with St Albans Diocese education team means that teaching staff regularly access training and professional development to further improve standards of teaching and learning. The subject leader provides very effective support and guidance for all staff in driving forwards the school's vision and ambition for RE.

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

The Abbey Primary has a strong Christian identity, which is tangible from the first moment of entering the school; the headteacher, governors and staff model and promote a culture of high expectations, inclusion and belonging for all children and families. School self-evaluation and subsequent action planning is honest and accurate and includes the views of all members of the school community through the gathering of feedback and opinion to inform future developments. The skilled and experienced headteacher has a clear, strategic approach to school improvement underpinned by Christian values. She ensures that the Christian vision provides a solid base to inform the curriculum and all school procedures and decisions. School leaders embrace training opportunities available including a recent diocesan SIAMS health check. Areas for development identified at the last inspection have been addressed fully.

The headteacher and governing body, led by an experienced chair, are fully committed to ensuring the Christian foundation of the school is central to all of its work. Governors are fully involved in monitoring the school's effectiveness as a church school through visits to RE lessons, participation in worship and consulting with children through the three pupil councils. The recent work on revising the school's vision to ensure its Christian foundation has ensured that all members of the school community are fully involved in shaping the school's future as a church school. Describing the vision and values, one member of staff explained 'it puts onto paper what we do here'. Staff live out the Christian values of the school in their daily practice and as a result are rightly proud of the highly positive relationships across the school between all adults and children which lead to high aspirations and outcomes for all. As one governor explained, 'the values provide a platform for children's personal wholeness, security and happiness and this leads to children reaching their full potential'. The leadership of RE and worship is given high status, ensuring that the excellent practice in these areas continues to contribute significantly the school's effectiveness as a church school. The RE subject leader has a clear and accurate picture of current standards and is well supported to have the capacity to drive developments in the subject.

Partnerships with stakeholders are highly positive; parents speak highly of the supportive and committed school leadership: 'the Abbey school, through its leadership, has helped to nurture my children's blossoming faith'. The school is very well regarded in the local community and consistently oversubscribed for places. The link between the school and clergy is exceptionally strong and the impact of this on children and families is a real strength of the school. Many pupils and families have been inspired to become active participants of life at the cathedral as a result of their experiences at school. As one parent explained 'the strong connection to faith and the Abbey Cathedral was instrumental in my children taking communion classes.' Children are keen supporters of charities, locally, nationally and internationally, as one child explained 'it doesn't matter what skin colour or religion you are, we should just help each other anyway'.