



DIOCESE OF PLYMOUTH

INSPECTION REPORT

St Mary's Catholic First School
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DfE Number: 838/3404
URN: 140771

Headteacher: Mrs Paula Fearn
Chair of Governors: Mrs Lizz Armstrong

This report to the Bishop of the Diocese under Canon 806 of the Code of Canon Law is also the report to the governors of the school on religious education. For Catholic maintained schools, the report also fulfils the requirements of Section 48 of the Education Act 2005.

Date of inspection: 20th October 2022
Date of previous inspection: December 2015

Reporting Inspector: Mrs Dawn Summers-Breeze
Additional Inspector: Miss Nicola Slack

Description of school

St Mary's is a one form entry Catholic First school set in the town of Dorchester in Dorset. It is the only First school in Plymouth CAST. There are 178 pupils on roll including the children on roll at the St Mary's Haycorns Pre-school situated on the same site. The proportion of children who are baptised Catholic is 27%. The percentage of children eligible for Pupil Premium is 12%, with 18% of pupils as identified with special educational needs and 13% with English as an additional language.

The previous S48 inspection report (December 2015) graded the school good. The most recent Ofsted report (February 2017) graded the school good.

Overall effectiveness of this Catholic school (summary statement)

Grade 2

This is a good school because:

- The Mission Statement is at the heart of the school and all strive 'to be the best they can be'.
- The school environment is an enriching visual celebration of the Catholic life of the school, inspiring all to care for their common home and to look after those in need.
- Pupils are well-behaved, polite and articulate with a strong sense of belonging and a duty to help others.
- The strong, cohesive team are well-led and managed by the headteacher, assistant head and RE lead.

The capacity of the school community to improve and develop is good because:

- Leadership of the school is strong. With a supporting, capable and well-informed Governing Body and a strong team of staff working in the school.

What the school should do to improve further:

To continue to embed Catholic Social Teaching within the curriculum by:

- Identifying where aspects are currently being taught
- Identifying where aspects can be developed within the curriculum

To ensure that there is enough challenge in each RE lesson to provide opportunities for progress for all pupils by:

- Sharing the current good practice of probing questioning within the school
- Ensuring extension tasks are provided for pupils

To involve pupils in the evaluation of the Catholic life of the school and Collective Worship by:

- Organising a schedule throughout the year and a format for record-keeping

a) The extent to which pupils contribute to and benefit from the Catholic Life of the school

There is a strong sense of community throughout the school. The Mission Statement is clear and drives the school in all it does inside and out of the classroom. Pupils are given plenty of opportunities to embrace the mission of the school, they support many charities both locally (the local care home and food bank) and globally (through charities such as Cafod and Missio). A variety of opportunities are provided for pupils to explore and respond to the needs of others and the environment. There is a good understanding of Catholic Social Teaching and the extensive needs of others. They understand the need to care for our common home as reflected in the work of the Eco Team and the Laudato Si days where the school community join together to improve the environment.

Pupils are proud of their school and enjoy coming to school. Their behaviour towards each other and to adults is very good. They are respectful and polite to all. They look after and support each other and relationships are strong.

The Chaplaincy team understand how important it is to use their God-given gifts for the service of others: eg, visiting a local care home and looking after each other in the playground. They lead liturgies and support classes in planning and leading liturgies. They ring the parish each week to ensure that those being prayed for at the church are included in school prayers. There is a buddy system in place between the Year 4 and Reception pupils. The Year 4 pupils will bring their buddy into assembly and sit with them, providing excellent role models. This system is hugely valued by both classes.

The staff of the school offer a wide range of provision for pupil wellbeing and development ensuring that pupils feel secure and confident that there is always someone to talk to if needed.

The school has ensured that Relationships, Sex and Health education has been introduced into the school at a level appropriate to age and capability.

b) The quality of provision for the Catholic Life of the school

The mission statement drives the school and encourages pupils, staff and governors 'to be the best' they can be. Displays around the school are all rooted in the Gospel Values and Virtues and upheld by the school and understood by pupils, governors and staff. The branches of love reward system for displaying the school values is reinforced in each class and during worship.

The school environment is rich and vibrant, with visual representations of all aspects that are at the core of the school including Gospel values, the Virtues, Characteristics of Learning, Pope Francis's message in Laudato Si, the tick box (how to turn things on their head) and the Branches of Love reward system.

This is an overwhelmingly inclusive school, all members of the community are welcomed and belong, the staff are a team who look after each other and are valued by each other, the pupils are proud of their school and enjoy coming to school, they feel they belong.

Pupils support each other well and understand the need to learn about different faiths in order to show respect to all. Pupils are encouraged to celebrate their faith within the school, whether Catholic or not.

The staff are a team that live out the mission statement. All staff are excellent role models and embody the virtues and values of the school. They understand them and embrace the opportunity to be part of the school community. They are greatly appreciative of the support they receive from each other and they look out for each other at all times. They feel valued by the leadership of the school.

There is good support for all pupils including the most vulnerable with teaching assistants trained in mental health and ELSA. The House of Joy at the front of the school supports those families who find it hard to come into school.

The wide variety of opportunities offered to pupils including the Eco Committee, the Chaplaincy Team, charity involvement, visiting the local residential care home ensures that provision for the spiritual and moral development includes all pupils. They understand that it is important that they display good behaviour and attitudes as people copy the actions of others. Relationships education is embedded in Personal, Social and Health Education and is rooted in Catholic teaching.

c) How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for the Catholic Life of the school

The head and governing board are fully committed to the Church's mission. There is a firm commitment to the Catholic life of the school and governors appreciate and value the strong leadership that the headteacher provides, deeply rooted in her faith. The RE Lead is clear about the school's priorities and ensures that new initiatives are in line with the school's focus.

The school works closely with other Catholic schools, sharing good practice and supporting where needed. They are appreciative of the support offered by the diocese and take up the opportunity for professional development, regularly.

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is evident throughout the school, as seen in the Laudato Si days, charity support and community links. The Chaplaincy team are clear about their duty and that of the Eco team, to 'make the earth better'. Embedding Catholic Social Teaching within the curriculum across the school will ensure pupils have a thorough understanding of all aspects.

Staff wellbeing is of paramount importance in the school. The leadership team speaks to every member of staff each morning. They are a team that look after each other and are looked after by the management. Governors talk regularly to the Headteacher to ensure her wellbeing. Training opportunities and information about mental health and strategies to de-stress are offered. The strong leadership and focus on wellbeing by the Headteacher and the Assistant Headteacher is fully appreciated by the staff; they feel supported and valued.

Parents are involved in different ways throughout the school: they run the school swimming pool, and attendance at Masses and celebrations is good. Parents appreciate the care and education the school provides. The Head is highly visible each morning and available for parents.

Governors are fully involved in evaluating the Catholic life of the school. The link governor for Catholic life visits half termly to monitor according to the accountability schedule that is in place. Catholic life is a standing agenda item for each Local Cast Board meeting. The Catholic life link governor has been hugely valuable to the school and the RE lead in particular. The school has a clear idea of the journey they are on and how to develop Catholic life in the future.

Pupils are involved in evaluating the Catholic life of the school in an informal manner and this would benefit from becoming more formal with identified record keeping.

Induction of new staff includes diocesan training, which is followed up within school, depending on the needs of the teachers. New staff feel well-supported in their induction.

a) How well pupils achieve and enjoy their learning in Religious Education

All pupils are progressing as expected in RE, some pupils including some with special educational needs are exceeding expectations in RE in comparison to other subject areas, as a result of the scaffolding being provided by adults in RE lessons. Pupils with English as an additional language are well supported in class to enable them to access the same learning as all pupils. The scheme used, alongside supplements from the diocese, covers all aspects of the *Religious Education Directory*. School data shows that age-related expectations in RE are in line with that expected of reading, writing and maths across the school. However, this is below other core subjects for greater depth.

Throughout the school the use of 'I wonder' questions are of great value in supporting spiritual reflection. The use of 'head, heart and hands' icons ensure that pupils are developing religious literacy across all attainment targets.

Pupils are highly articulate and use subject specific vocabulary from an early age showing their ability to communicate effectively. New vocabulary is introduced and explained clearly, and in an age-appropriate manner. Reflection tables in each class reflect the current unit of work displaying key vocabulary.

In most lessons, teachers use a variety of resources to ensure that different needs are met including: video, drama and props. This leads to high engagement and enjoyment for most pupils.

Where the lessons are well-paced and provide good challenge, pupils are fully engaged and work well with each other and independently. However, this is not consistent across all classes. Where pace was not good, this led to low level disruption.

Behaviour for learning was generally good in most lessons, with pupils eager to contribute to discussions, feeling secure enough in class to take a chance and suggest answers, confident to have a go, without fear of failure.

Feedback from teachers, particularly through probing questioning ensures that pupils understand how well they are doing and how to develop their learning. Consistency across the school in this will ensure that the needs of all pupils are met.

b) The quality of teaching, learning and assessment in Religious Education

Professional development opportunities offered to staff ensure that they feel confident and have a good understanding of subject knowledge to teach the Religious Education curriculum. They are well-supported by the RE lead who also provides training where needed. The RE lead has adapted the scheme to make it the school's own, ensuring that knowledge, understanding and skills are built progressively.

The use of regular recaps, highlighting links to prior learning, and questioning throughout the lessons supports ongoing assessment in class. Where questioning is well-planned and used to cover all levels of ability, it is highly effective. However, this is not consistent across the school. Extension questions used in feedback ensures pupils are fully aware of how well they are doing in RE and they are given time to respond to feedback.

Teachers are clear about how pupils use the school values, virtues, and the language that is used in the classroom to make decisions and reflect spiritually. For example, one pupil told another that they were not using kind hands, and another pupil that they were not being loving towards each other. Class discussion and meditations encourage spiritual reflections.

Teaching assistants across the school are highly skilled and were used in a variety of ways to support the pupils' learning including encouraging pupils to think more deeply, to listen carefully, and recording verbal answers for the class big book. Their use of questioning enabled pupils to extend their learning.

c) How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for Religious Education

The scheme that the school uses, along with supplements from the diocese, covers the requirements of the Bishops' Conference including any additional requirements of the diocesan Bishop. Religious Education has parity with other core subjects with regard to timetabling and resourcing, as it is given a high priority within the school.

All staff have regular opportunities for training in different aspects of RE including focusing on driver words and embedding the gospel values and virtues. They have received regular updates and training on the scheme used.

The RE Lead, along with the RE link Governor monitor Religious Education regularly and effectively. Along with a variety of monitoring activities, external moderation ensures that staff receive regular feedback on quality of teaching and how to develop further, for example, the use of the RE display and the structure of the lesson.

The curriculum is planned to ensure progress over time and good transition across age groups. For example, the pre-school works closely with the Reception class teacher to ensure that there are plenty of age-appropriate resources and activities such as: use of puppets, story-time, stories with gospel messages and singing.

The Religious Education in the classroom is enhanced through a wealth of extra-curricular opportunities for pupils based on Catholic Social Teaching including: Laudato Si days, charity work, community, eco committee.

There is an Religious Education action plan in place and this, along with extensive monitoring and evaluation of Religious Education, ensures that self-evaluation is of a high quality and further actions leads to improved Religious Education provision for the pupils. For example the school has been working on ensuring the quality of writing in Religious Education is at least as good as in English.

Collective Worship

Grade 2

a) How well pupils respond to and participate in the school's Collective Worship

Pupils are prayerful, respectful and reverent during worship. They listen carefully and join in singing and praying with enthusiasm. Pupils are always involved in whole school worship through reading of the Gospel and saying prayers. Pupils' contribution is confident and fluent.

The school focus on the Virtues and Gospel Values has led pupils to a clear understanding of the need to help others and pray for others. The inclusion of the sick of the parish in the school prayers each week highlights the sense of a prayerful community in which all are involved.

The Chaplaincy team enjoy opportunities to plan and lead liturgies. They recently led three classes in saying the rosary and joining in the 'One million children praying the rosary'. They also support classes in leading and planning liturgies.

The Religious Education scheme offers an opportunity at the end of each unit for all pupils to plan and lead worship based on that unit. Pupils value this and are appreciative of the opportunity.

Pupils understand the cycle of the church's year and that different colours represent the different times of year. Pupil talked with enthusiasm about class meditation and the saying of traditional prayers. They enjoyed being involved in the praying the rosary.

b) The quality of Collective Worship provided by the school

Prayer and worship are a central part of the life of the school with pupils praying regularly three times throughout the school day, and during collective worship, either in class or whole school across the week. Prayers are displayed in every classroom on or around the reflection tables. Reflection tables reflect the current Religious Education unit being taught and the cycle of the Church's year.

A different Gospel assembly format has been introduced this academic year and is being embedded. All staff received training and have strong role models in leading worship in the Head and the RE lead. Alongside the cycle of the Church's year the focus for whole school worship is on the Gospel values and Virtues. School systems are reinforced such as the Branches of Love reward system.

Mass is celebrated at least termly, and the school supports the sacramental programme of the parish. The school celebrates other significant days such as Mary's birthday with services and assemblies.

Teachers have received training and feel confident to plan and lead themselves as well as helping pupils plan and lead acts of worship. Further support is provided by the Head and the RE lead. Masses and celebrations are well attended by parents and governors, parishioners (pre-covid).

c) How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for the prayer life of the school.

The headteacher is confident and experienced in leading worship as is the RE lead. The headteacher leads a whole school liturgy each Monday, based on the Sunday Gospel.

The teachers feel confident in planning Collective Worship and, where they feel they need support it is provided. For example, one teacher shadowed another teacher to build confidence in planning and leading worship. Training on the new format which is being embedded has ensured staff feel confident to lead worship, regardless of prior experience.

A variety of opportunities are on offer for pupils to worship in different ways, including whole school and in class.

The Chaplaincy team lead liturgies, for example on Mary's Meals, which they plan and lead with the invaluable support of the school's Chaplain. They have a format in place for planning and they have supported other classes in planning and leading liturgies.

All pupils are given the opportunity to plan and lead worship in class through the end of RE unit response.

The RE and Catholic life link governor supports the RE lead in ensuring that Collective Worship is monitored and evaluated regularly through the CAST governor accountability schedule. Pupil voice is used in an informal way, and should be planned and recorded.

Collective worship is seen as a priority in terms of resourcing, timetabling, staffing and training.

Summary of Parental Questionnaires

There were 59 parent surveys received. All were very positive and gave high praise for the school, with just a small number wanting to be more informed about Relationships, Sex and Health education.

Comments included:

'Every teacher is amazing. Top school.'

'All the children seem very caring and supportive of each other and the staff are very welcoming and caring.'

'Great values and friendly feel.'

'Every child is 100% treated as an individual.'

'They accept all religions and beliefs and follow a variety of different religious celebrations for the children to experience.'

'The school is more like a family for the community.'

'It's attention to detail. St Mary's never disappoints or forgets what is important to/for its children, families and wider community.'

'It has a welcoming and nurturing feel to the school. We as parents feel well-informed, involved and encouraged to be part of the school community.'

'My son comes home excited about what he has learnt during the school day.'

'Mrs Fearn along with the rest of the school staff ensure that all children are cared for, included and learn in a safe environment, led by Gospel values.'

'I'm not Catholic but I appreciate the way the school teaches important moral values. The way we should treat people, think about other people and look after our planet. I also like the way it teaches children about other religions and beliefs as I think they are important.'

'The values are not just spoken, they are lived at St Mary's.'

'It is the best school in Dorchester with incredible and supportive teachers, both religiously and academically.'