



Archdiocese of Birmingham

INSPECTION REPORT

ST MARY'S CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL BICESTER

Inspection dates 3rd - 4th December 2007
Reporting Inspector Mr Joseph Skivington

Inspection carried out under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005

Type of School	Catholic Primary
Age range of pupils	4-11 years
Number on roll	260
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governors	Mr Ian Inshaw
School address	Queen's Avenue Bicester Oxon OX26 2NX
Telephone number	01869 252035
E-mail address	headteacher.3824@st-marys-bicester.oxon.sch.uk
Parish	Immaculate Conception
Date of previous inspection	June 2003
DCSF School Number	931/3824
Unique Reference Number	123207

Headteacher Miss Patricia Pickering

Description of the school

St Mary's is an average size primary school serving the town of Bicester and surrounding villages. There are 260 children on roll of whom 96% are from a Catholic background. Most come from White British families but an increasing number are from families where English is an additional language. The links with the parish are close and strong. Several teaching assistants are also catechists in the parish. The headteacher has been in post for just over a year. Standards of attainment on entry are variable, but broadly average.

Overall effectiveness of the school

St Mary's is a good school with several outstanding features. The excellent leadership of the headteacher and her vision for the future is fully shared by the governing body, with the full support of staff and parents. The whole school community was energised and its sense of mission refreshed by an inspiring shared vision exercise in which everyone, including the pupils, participated. The spiritual and moral development of the pupils is excellent, with the nurturing of the prayer life of the pupils outstanding. Provision for religious education is good. Pupils achieve well because of the sterling quality of teaching and learning. The leadership and management of the subject are at present satisfactory.

The areas of concern raised at the last inspection have been effectively addressed. Schemes of work are securely in place and the format of lessons now meets the learning needs of all the pupils. There are now sufficient materials and resources, with information technology increasingly used as an aid to teaching and learning.

The capacity to improve further is good because of the clear determination and inspiration of the headteacher to provide the very best quality of care and education, as well as the high standard of teaching in almost every year group. The capacity for the subject leader to move the subject forward is less certain as planning focuses too much on administrative matters at the expense of more important priorities.

What the school should do to improve further

- Provide clearer objectives in the RE development plan which prioritise teaching and learning in order to raise standards of achievement, especially those of the more able pupils.
- Monitor individual progress more closely, so that each pupil knows where they are and what they must do to get better, using the marking of written work more effectively and consistently to achieve this.

The Catholic Life of the School

Leadership and Management

Governors, pupils, staff and parents are full of praise for the headteacher who has shared her vision for the future of St Mary's very effectively by calling all to reflect on the mission of the school and how each one can play a part in the realisation of their vision for the school. The inspirational effect of this exercise was expressed by governors, pupils, and staff during the inspection. A clear framework is in place to monitor the Catholic life of the school. The governing body is mindful of its responsibilities towards the Catholic ethos of the school in maintaining its openness and special identity, and are frequent, supportive partners in all that goes on. The teaching staff and all significant adults in the children's lives are fully committed to the values of the Gospel which are the focus of the daily life of the school. Leadership at all levels actively promotes the spiritual and moral development of the pupils, not least by excellent role modelling and encouragement.

Collective Worship

There is excellent provision for collective worship, prayer opportunities, and a close following of the liturgical year. Mass is celebrated regularly, both in school as class Masses but also in the parish church. Grace is said before and after lunch, and prayer is said at the beginning and end of each day. The Year 1 Mass was an excellent celebration, well attended by parents, and the pupils participated fully with their own prayers and readings, which were well read. The singing, accompanied by sign language, was enthusiastic and the school chaplain spoke well in a way that was understood by even the youngest pupils. Pupils have the opportunity to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation during Lent and non-Catholic pupils readily take up the invitation to participate. The sacramental preparation programme has been taken over by the parish with continued support from the school. The effects of the homilies they hear which contain the lessons from the parables and miracles of Jesus, as well as the many encouragements every day to respect and care for others, is very evident in their care for each other as well as their excellent behaviour around the school.

Community Cohesion

St. Mary's is a welcoming school, with openness to all at the centre of its life. Links with the parish are strong as seen in the many teachers and parents taking an active role in catechesis. Links with the diocese are now closer. Pupils themselves express a concerned awareness that they are all part of a wider, more diverse one human family responsible to each other. Different religions are explored through the curriculum. No pupil feels either different from the others or that their own beliefs are discredited. The pupils are involved in raising money for local charities and also aid for people outside their own immediate neighbourhood.

Religious Education

Achievement and Standards in Religious Education

Pupils enter the school with levels of religious knowledge which are broadly in line with national expectations. By the end of Year 6 they are attaining levels which are above what is expected nationally. This represents good achievement and progress over time. Pupils with special education needs achieve as well as the others because of the extra support they receive in lessons and tasks which generally meet their learning needs well. In Year 1 and Year 2 pupils make good progress in the knowledge and understanding of key words and concepts and are able to retell a story with correct sequencing. The understanding of religious symbols is sound. Also, even the youngest know there are special times and places to pray and be still and their response is always reverential, with care taken to make the Sign of the Cross and join in the prayers. In Year 3 and Year 4 pupils can write at some length using empathy, for example to relive the events of Holy Week. However, written work generally does not provide scope for the pupils to express at any length their response to what they are learning. Factual recall and understanding is nevertheless good. Year 5 and Year 6 show good Bible referencing skills and can write with empathy and real understanding on, for instance, the events of Pentecost. They compose some beautiful, personal prayers which express the difficulties of discipleship and show that they can relate belief to everyday action. They enjoy the opportunities for discussion but say they would welcome more challenge in assignments, as well as some indication of what level they have reached and what they must aim for. They say that they enjoy their religious education lessons and certainly their response in lessons is one of attentiveness and effort. Pupils contribute to the school community through the school council. They feel their voice is heard, and they can contribute through

involvement in running charity fund raising events. Older pupils care well for the younger ones and generally behaviour is excellent.

Quality of Provision for Religious Education

Teaching and Learning

Teaching and learning are both solidly good. Good teaching is characterised by challenge and high expectation which take into account the learning needs of both lower and higher ability pupils. This was demonstrated in a lesson on the imagery of God in the Bible. Questions were searching and involved pupils in their own learning. They responded with good intellectual effort. There is good variety in teaching strategies, including drama and music. Teaching assistants are invaluable in allowing groups of differing abilities to learn more effectively. Written work is acknowledged to be not as good as the quality of the discussions in lessons and an area for development. There is no consistent RE marking policy to support and encourage individual progress particularly to stretch the more able.

Curriculum

The curriculum follows the diocesan guidelines, is balanced and generally meets external requirements. Other faiths are explored through topics on Judaism and Islam. The school is using *All that I Am* as the sex and relationship programme effectively. The sacramental preparation programme is run well by the parish with close involvement of the school. The curriculum is further enriched through the many charitable appeals, which allow the pupils to exercise in a practical way their feelings of generosity to others less well off than themselves. The curriculum makes a very good contribution to their spiritual and moral development because it raises their awareness of others and their duty towards them. All pupils regardless of background are immensely keen to get involved and give their time generously.

Leadership and Management of Religious Education

Although pupils make good progress in their learning because the quality of teaching is generally good, the leadership and management of the subject are satisfactory. It is not as good as the teaching because it does not have an effective impact on the raising of standards of achievement. The subject development plan deals mainly with administration issues and does not successfully address priorities, for example, what needs to be done to enhance assessment for learning, with a clear timetable for reaching targets. Management indeed ensures that the subject runs reasonably smoothly and that routine procedures are followed. Quality assurance follows agreed procedures but is not incisive enough to get to the root of all problems, in particular the inconsistency in the assessment of written work, the effectiveness of the monitoring of individual progress, and the lack of challenge for the more gifted and talented pupils. Initiatives are imaginatively launched and there is no shortage of pilot schemes, but their effective implementation and subsequent reviews to measure their success lacks any rigour. Clearer priorities need to result from the monitoring and evaluation of performance if the subject is to achieve excellence. Resources are satisfactory and managed adequately. Information technology is used effectively in some lessons and this good practice can be shared. Wall displays are colourful and demonstrate to the casual visitor the very Catholic nature of St Mary's, as well as affirming the work of the pupils themselves and educating others. The governors discharge their duties towards religious education with real care and concern. All statutory requirements are met.