



Archdiocese of Birmingham

INSPECTION REPORT

ARCHBISHOP ILSLEY CATHOLIC SCHOOL & SIXTH FORM CENTRE BIRMINGHAM

Inspection dates 23rd-24th September 2009
Reporting Inspector Mr Joseph Skivington

Inspection carried out under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005

Type of School	Comprehensive
Age range of pupils	11-18 years
Number on roll	1317
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governors	Mrs M Mills
School address	Victoria Road Acocks Green Birmingham B27 7XY
Telephone number	0121 70642
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Date of previous inspection	October 2006
DCSF School Number	330/4804
Unique Reference Number	103541

Headteacher Mr Seamus M O'Donnell

Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two Diocesan Inspectors. The inspectors visited 11 religious education (RE) part lessons to observe teaching and learning and students' behaviour and held meetings with governors, staff, and groups of students. They observed the school's work, including assemblies, and looked at a range of evidence, including key documentation such as the school's development plan, monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning in RE, and students' work.

Information about the school

Archbishop Ilsley School is a popular, oversubscribed school with 1,317 students on role, 95% of whom are baptised Catholic from mainly Irish heritage. Students are drawn from inner city Birmingham. Free school meals indicator is 60%, well above the national average, while in the sixth form, 50% qualify for the education maintenance allowance. Of the teaching staff around 59% are Catholic.

Overall effectiveness of the school as a Catholic school

Archbishop Ilsley is a good Catholic school with outstanding features. Students and parents are glowing in their praise for the warmth and inclusive welcome that is found in this vibrant faith community. All share a set of common values, which is based on respect and care for every individual as special in the eyes of God, regardless of differing faiths or none. The outstanding provision for community cohesion is based on the proactive policy of the school and the active involvement of a large number of students. Pupils' participation in collective worship and their response to the invitation to pray is excellent, particularly when it is voluntary and student led.

Outcomes from the religious education programme are good, both in the main school and the sixth form with all groups of students, including those with learning needs, making good progress through all key stages where there is good teaching and purposeful learning. In some lessons, however, the more able students are not always stretched as much they could be. Standards are comparable to similar schools but, at GCSE level, results in religious education are below the national average and those achieved in other subjects in the school. Although more able students are not always sufficiently challenged, teachers are committed to high pupil achievement and the religious education programme makes a significant contribution to their spiritual and moral development. Achievement and attainment in the sixth form are excellent.

The school's capacity for sustained improvement is excellent because of the inspirational quality of leadership, objective measurable targets for future planning, the sustained upward trend in standards of attainment, the appointment of a spiritual director, and a well qualified staff teaching in the RE department. Religious education and Catholic life are regularly monitored through well embedded procedures allowing for reflection and revisiting the mission of the school, and involving parents, students, and staff. Governance of the school is excellent because of the foundation governors' intimate knowledge of all aspects of the school's life and the level of challenge it sets for whole school performance.

What the school should do to improve further

- Sharpen the effectiveness of assessment for learning so that it has real impact on individual progress, particularly in the quality and guidance of the marking of students' written work
- Ensure a consistent the level of challenge in lessons for all students, but particularly for the more able

How good outcomes are for individuals and groups of pupils

Standards of attainment in religious education at the end of Key Stages 3 and 4 are broadly comparable to those in schools which are similar. However, results in RE are lower than those in other subjects in the school and reflect in terms of grades achieved at GCSE the lower than average results of the same students in English. At the end of Key Stage 3 standards achieved are in line with expectation, when measured against the subject's own level indicators, particularly in reflecting on, and learning from religion. Standards of attainment in the sixth form are above average, evidence of the excellent and challenging teaching and the growing, enthusiastic uptake of the subject at AS and A Level. The quality of students' learning and progress is good. Those with learning difficulties achieve as well as the others because of extra support in lessons and when tasks are set which are tailored more specifically to their learning needs. In lessons pupils apply themselves diligently and respond enthusiastically when lessons are challenging and where they are having to make real intellectual effort. This is not a consistent experience for all students, and on occasion students are not sufficiently challenged by the content of the lesson, or a teaching style, which does not encourage independent learning and research. This is particularly frustrating for more able students in those lessons who find the work they get, to be unsubstantial and undemanding. In the best lessons they are enthused and fully engaged because of teaching that is inspirational and that stretches their abilities and enthuses them. The result is students enjoy RE and want to pursue it further into the sixth form, both as an examination subject and in the popular core RE course run for all sixth formers.

Students benefit enormously from the Catholic life of the school and, in a wide variety of ways, make an excellent contribution to it. They appreciate and value the Catholic ethos of the school while at the same time able to discuss spiritual and moral issues, such as situation ethics, and entertain ideas that are different from their own. Their generous response to the needs of others beyond the school, coupled with their willingness to accept and value difference, makes a valuable contribution to the tolerance and harmony of the whole community. Many take part in the Young Leaders group. Students have invested much in their own education, taking part in evaluating the quality of their school experience through regular feedback, and playing an acknowledged part, particularly through the lively school council, in whole school reflection on its Catholic mission. The sense of belonging and affirmation is summed up in the full part played by students of other faiths and cultures, for instance, last year's head boy was from the Sikh community.

The response to collective worship is excellent. They are prayerful, reverent and willing participants in the spiritual and liturgical life of the school. Their response to voluntary Masses or prayer opportunities is exemplary, and they themselves run weekly prayer times, such as novenas before major feasts, in the well used school chapel. Every student Catholic or non-Catholic takes responsibility in turn for the preparation and leading of daily prayer in tutor groups, preparing and leading assembly, and serving at Masses. The prayer life of the school benefits enormously from the invaluable animation of the chaplain and the spiritual director, who find the students more than willing to participate in the work of the chaplaincy. The Hamper Masses and Founder's day Mass involve a large number of students across the whole school.

How effective leaders and managers are in developing the Catholic life of the school

The Catholic life of the school is promoted very effectively by leaders and managers, who plan and review continually how to improve outcomes for students. The quality of Catholic life is well known to the leadership team, not only through audits, but also from valuable feedback from students and parents. Collective worship is likewise monitored carefully, with close liaison between governors senior leadership and the chaplaincy team to ensure a first class programme for assemblies and liturgies. Governors meet once a term to specifically scrutinise and evaluate the Catholic life of the school as well as the progress of the RE schemes of work, for example the effectiveness and suitability of the Key Stage 4 modules. Minutes of these meetings are of some length and detail, specifically challenging in their call for accountability and improvements. Tutors are well supported

in providing a meaningful quality of daily prayer for their charges, and this is much appreciated particularly by those teachers who are not Catholic. Regular inset provides a scriptural and Catholic grounding for the *raison d'être* of the school and its mission. Responsibility for the oversight and animation of the Catholic life of the school belongs to the spiritual director and this secures the effectiveness of this key aspect. The success of leadership and management is seen in the students' high standard of behaviour and care for others, their participation in worship, their relationships with peers and staff, and the impressive quality of their Faith life.

The leadership of RE is excellent. The subject is managed well, priorities are clearly laid out and planned for, and through lesson observation and subject reviews the quality of teaching and learning is monitored well. This is impacting on standards of attainment, which are now steadily moving up.

There is a clear policy to promote community cohesion with the result that the school has an openness to all, all are included in its life, and generous outreach to the local community as well as response to global needs is an impressive living out of the values of the Gospel. The school collaborates well with other Catholic schools and participates in community undertakings. Those of other denominations or faiths feel that they are able to express their beliefs comfortably. Students explore other faiths to some depth through the RE curriculum. Here is a community where there is a strong sense of belonging while differences are acknowledged and celebrated.

The quality of the school's work in providing Catholic education

The quality of teaching is good with both satisfactory and outstanding practice observed during the inspection. Teaching in the sixth form is outstanding and this is reflected in the above average results at AS and A Level, as well as the challenge and engagement offered by the core RE course popular with all sixth form students. Challenge and high expectation mark the excellent lessons, where students are encouraged to develop their thinking and evaluative skills. Where lessons are less than good, the pace is slow, the different needs of students, especially the more able, are not met, teaching becomes over didactic and students become passive or restless. The result is that they are not achieving as well as they could. The scrutiny of written work from the recent past shows that the helpfulness of marking was inconsistent and did not really show the students what they must do to improve. There is now evidence of more formative and challenging marking being adopted to encourage and support individual progress. In the best lessons observed the more able were certainly challenged to use and develop their thinking skills and to handle impressively quite difficult theological and philosophical concepts.

The curriculum meets the needs of all groups of students well, as well as meeting the *Curriculum Directory for Religious Education* requirements, such as the allocation of time. Relationship education is dealt with sensitively and clearly, consistent with the teaching of the Church. A particular strength of the school is the emphasis on the students' learning *from religion* as well as *about religion* throughout all key stages, not forgetting this aspect's importance in the push to raise academic standards particularly at GCSE. Teaching about other faiths is included in the curriculum, appropriately not as comparative religion. Students learn about the integrity of others' beliefs without compromising their own. Resources are well managed and ICT is used imaginatively to support the learning experience.

Provision for collective worship is excellent. There are ample opportunities for spiritual nourishment through prayer, retreat and pilgrimage. Masses are offered for different groups. The provision has a good range and is well supported by all staff, not least in their own personal commitment and role modelling. This brings about a very good response and good levels of participation from the students.