



Diocese of Arundel and Brighton

INSPECTION REPORT

St Thomas a Becket Catholic Infant School

3 Tutts Barn Lane, Eastbourne, East Sussex BN22 8XT

Telephone: 01323 726004

e-mail address: office@stthomasbecket-inf.e-sussex.sch.uk

DfES Number: 114577

Headteacher: Mrs Ruth Jones

Chair of Governors: Mr John McManus

Canonical Inspection under Canon 806 on behalf of the Bishop of Arundel & Brighton
and inspection of Denominational Education under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005

Date of inspection: 29 November 2011
Date of previous inspection: 26 June 2008

Lead Inspector: Mr Michael Sheridan
Associate Inspector: Mrs Catherine Walker

Description of School

St Thomas a Becket Catholic Infant School is voluntary aided. It is situated in the Eastbourne Deanery of the Diocese of Arundel & Brighton. It is maintained by East Sussex LA. The principal parishes the school serves are Our Lady of Ransom, Eastbourne, Christ the King, Langney, St Joachim, Hampden Park, St Wilfrid's, Polegate and St George's, Hailsham. The proportion of pupils who are baptised Catholics is 91%. The average weekly proportion of curriculum time given to Religious Education is 8.8% in the Foundation Stage and 8.7% in Key Stage 1.

The school takes pupils from 4 to 7 years. The number of pupils currently on roll is 180. The school intake reflects a range of social backgrounds from a wide catchment area. The attainment of pupils on entering the school is 'variable'. The proportion of pupils eligible for free schools meals is 7.8%, which is below the national average. Around 4.5% of the pupils receive extra support in class and one pupil has a statement of special educational needs. The proportion of pupils from ethnic minority heritages is 40%, with the largest proportion of Asian/Asian British heritage, and is well above the national average. The proportion of pupils from homes where English is an additional language (approximately 16.8%) is above average.

The school shares the same campus with St Thomas a Becket Catholic Junior School and the two schools federated under one governing body in September 2010 in order to sustain the distinctive Catholic ethos of the Infant School and to ensure that Religious Education is taught according to the requirements of the school's trust deed. The Infant School has autonomy in respect of the management of all other areas. The school acquired Fairtrade School status in 2010. It has also gained the Artsmark Gold and Healthy Schools Silver awards.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1: Outstanding; Grade 2: Good; Grade 3: Satisfactory;
Grade 4: Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of this Catholic school

Grade 2

St Thomas a Becket Infants is a good school, which has a strong Catholic ethos. Underpinned by gospel values, relationships are very good throughout the school. The executive headteacher and associate headteacher give strong leadership and share their vision of the Catholic life of the school with both staff and governors. The Mission Statement supports the life and work of the school and is prominent on all policies. The school's leadership has an awareness of the strengths of the school and has identified areas for development. Pupils are well cared for and speak highly of the positive relationships they have with staff. For example, one pupil said, 'I think we have a good school because the teachers are very nice.' Governors support and monitor the Catholic life of the school and continue to develop their role as critical friends. The school is strong at promoting and achieving community cohesion but the school has itself identified that the global aspect should be further developed. The prayer life of the school is good. However, more active participation in assemblies would further assist pupils in their spiritual development. Achievement and standards in RE is good. However, a consistent focus on work coverage in Reception would empower pupils to progress even more swiftly during the Foundation Stage. In Year 1 pupils make good progress where teaching is good to outstanding. In Year 2 pupils also make very good progress as teaching is very strong. The Catholic content of the Religious Education programme is predominantly good but the time allocated to the

subject at Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 is less than the Diocese requires. Leadership of Religious Education is good and the subject coordinator successfully works in partnership with a post holder in the junior school.

Improvement since the last inspection

Grade 2

The school has established Religious Education as a core subject for development in the school improvement plan with inbuilt structures to monitor the effectiveness of policy and practice. Monitoring is rigorously carried out by the governing body, the executive headteacher, associate headteacher and Religious Education co-ordinator. The school has a comprehensive policy for Education in Personal Relationships (EPR) and the school's coverage of EPR, delivered through Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) provision, is good. The school has fully implemented the 'Here I Am' Religious Education programme which follows the directions issued by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. The teaching of world faiths is an integral part of this programme. There is a marking policy in place which highlights requirements that comments by teachers in pupil workbooks are developmental, particularly in enabling pupils to know what steps they must take to improve. Although there is some evidence that this takes place it should now be applied more consistently throughout Key Stage 1. The school has developed robust assessment procedures which inform planning.

The capacity of the school community to improve and develop

Grade 2

Governors and senior leaders have an awareness of the strengths of the school and have identified areas for development through their candid self-evaluation and robust planning. As a result, the school has a good capacity to improve.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that pupil voice is exercised to a greater degree in the appointment of student council members and in the development of school projects
- Develop further the global dimension in the promotion of community cohesion
- Ensure that the curriculum time for Religious Education in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 meets the Bishops' Conference and Diocesan requirements.
- Ensure that appropriate challenge is offered to all pupils in Religious Education lessons by matching tasks to pupils' abilities, particularly those of the most able, and by adopting a consistent approach to formative marking which empowers pupils to know what steps they must take to improve.

The Catholic Life of the School

Leadership and Management

Grade 2

Leadership and management of the Catholic life of the school are good. The executive headteacher of the federation and the associate headteacher of the school work effectively together to give strong leadership in promoting the Catholic life of the school. They meet formally every fortnight and examine priorities with respect to the school improvement plan. The headteacher, governors and senior staff share a common view of the school's mission as a caring Catholic community. The Catholic ethos and Religious Education have a prominent place in the school improvement plan. The governing body fulfils its role in upholding the school's Catholic foundation to very good effect through overseeing its strategic direction as a partner in the federation of Catholic schools and through close monitoring of the Catholic life of the school and the Religious Education provision. The infant school and the junior school share a common Mission Statement which affirms 'the Catholic ethos by fostering and developing faith communities in...' the two federated '...schools, parishes and homes.' Within the Mission Statement the schools highlight respect for each person as an individual and, as a consequence, endeavour to lead pupils '...towards an understanding of themselves as unique beings created in God's image' and '...to understand that their talents are God given'. There is a version of the Mission Statement which is expressed in age-appropriate language for the pupils and displayed near the school entrance and in all classrooms. The overwhelming majority of parents have a high regard for the school. Religious artefacts and displays mark the school as distinctively Catholic. For example, themes from the 'Here I Am' Religious Education programme are represented in impressive focal areas. During the inspection the theme was on 'Visitors' and a number of displays had Advent as a key component. Each focal area contained eye-catching artistic crucifixes which the school had purchased earlier in the year. Transition is strong between the two schools. One parent commented, 'There is an excellent Catholic ethos throughout both schools and good links with the junior school.'

The Prayer Life of the School

Grade 2

The prayer life of the school is good. The school has a Collective Worship policy which is reviewed by governors and senior leadership annually and shared with staff at the beginning of each academic year. There is a schedule of whole-school Masses and a well-planned programme of assemblies, linked to the liturgical year, supports the 'Here I Am' Religious Education curriculum. Once a term, each class leads an act of worship to which parents are invited. One of the ways the federation fulfils its remit with respect to the school's provision of Religious Education and worship is by the infants and juniors celebrating liturgical events together. For example, a joint Christmas carol service was held at the parish church last year and both schools came together to celebrate Palm Sunday at the beginning of Holy Week. Regular monitoring and evaluation of the prayer life of the school have secured consistently good provision. During the inspection, the whole-school assembly attended was carefully planned and dealt with the topic of 'Visitors'. It linked the theme of Advent to Bethlehem, making good use of live internet maps of the world to locate the town of Jesus' birth. The parish priest contributed to the assembly by relating his experiences of his visit to Bethlehem. Interaction between the headteacher and pupils was very good. The message was strongly reinforced by

good use of an imaginary mobile telephone conversation with a friend who is unexpectedly coming to stay. Expert questioning by the headteacher was employed to lead pupils to imagine how they would respond in this situation. However, more active participation in assemblies would further assist pupils in their spiritual development. Many different prayer opportunities are offered throughout the day. Pupils feel comfortable about writing their own prayers and a number of examples were displayed in their books. In a Year 1 class, the Religious Education lesson on Advent started with the singing of an Advent song and ended with a prayer relating to aspects of an Advent calendar. Time was built into the lesson for quiet reflection. This was characteristic of a number of lessons observed but should be consistently extended across the school so that all pupils have opportunities to learn how to 'be still' in God's presence. Parents and carers are actively involved in the prayer life of the school and are invited to attend Masses and assemblies in the school. Of particular note is an outstanding initiative of the parents called the 'Stay and Pray' group, which meets monthly at the beginning of the school day to pray for the school community and follows the topics from the 'Here I Am' Religious Education programme. Moreover, following a suggestion from the group, every pupil takes home a special Bible quote to share with their family during each of the six terms which make up the school year. This is excellent practice which would benefit other Catholic schools in the Diocese. As a result of the above, the prayer life of the school makes a strong contribution to the pupils' spiritual, moral and social development.

How effectively does the school promote community cohesion?

Grade 2

The promotion of community cohesion in the school is good. The school is inclusive. Pupils come from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds and heritages and all are welcomed and included into the ethos of the school. Pupils are considerate and courteous toward visitors and relationships between the staff and pupils are warm and positive. The two schools in the federation work together very well. The headteachers regularly swap schools in order to lead assemblies. Governors and senior leaders have drawn up a plan of action which encompasses shared INSET days and continuous professional development within the federation. This will help to build capacity for even further improvement in the school's Catholic life. Initiatives such as peer mentoring of pupils within the infant school and shared activities with pupils in the junior school have made a positive contribution to the good behaviour evident in the school. There is a clear anti-bullying policy in place, although incidents of bullying in the school are extremely rare. Pupils with special educational needs are valued by the school community and make good progress. Pastoral care is a strength of the school. There is a school council, members of which are selected by teachers. However, the school could incorporate a more democratic process into the appointment of council members so that greater account is taken of the pupils' views. The school council is in the process of raising funds to make improvements to the school garden. Strong links exist between the school and the parishes it serves. The parish priests are regular visitors and information is regularly exchanged between school and the local parishes via newsletters, circulars and posters. Local parish events, such as the Alzheimer's Carol service, are advertised and supported by the school. The school choir has visited the local hospice, the local shopping mall and local nursing home, to sing Christmas Carols. The school premises are used for extra-curricular activities such as Brownies, karate and football. Pupils' diverse backgrounds are recognised and valued in Religious Education. The 'Here I Am' Religious Education programme includes study of other denominations of Christianity and other world religions. Pupils are encouraged to consider the needs of those less fortunate than

themselves by raising funds to support for example, Oasis, a local homeless project, the Cabrini Children's Society and a school community in the Cameroon with whom it also shares written links. Whilst this is good practice, the inspectors agree with the school's assessment that the global dimension of community cohesion should be further developed. Overall, pupils in the school are equipped with skills which enable them to take a full and active part in their neighbourhood and are given a strong sense of the important part they play in supporting those who are in need of help.

Religious Education

Achievement and Standards in Religious Education

Grade 2

Achievement and standards in Religious Education are good. Attainment on entry to the school is broadly average and most pupils have considerable experience of Church and worship. Due to focused teaching in the Foundation Stage, pupils settle quickly to school and make good progress in Religious Education. However a consistent focus on work coverage in Reception would empower pupils to progress even more swiftly during the Foundation Stage. Pupils reach appropriate levels of attainment by the end of Key Stage 1. Good levels of religious literacy are reached. For example, one pupil commented, 'Prayers are very special. They are messages to God and they mean something very special.' The drive to challenge the more able pupils and the use of activities to develop their higher order thinking skills have resulted in them achieving high standards. Pupils with special educational needs are quickly targeted and receive appropriate support to enable them to make good progress. Most pupils are well able to apply what they have learnt to their own lives and experiences. Pupils with special educational needs and those who have English as a second language make very good progress because they are well supported in class. All pupils are enthusiastic learners. They show a developing awareness of the spiritual and moral dimensions of what they study and have good empathetic skills which enable them to gain a greater understanding of Scripture.

Teaching and learning in Religious Education

Grade 2

Teaching and learning in Religious Education is overall good, sometimes outstanding and, on fewer occasions, satisfactory. Strong yet sensitive class management ensures a positive atmosphere for learning, where pupils want to succeed and are excited by their discovery of knowledge. Positive affirmation of all their ideas and suggestions enables them to take risks and to extend their learning. During the inspection the majority of lessons observed were good or better. In lessons which are outstanding, pupils are stimulated by the pace of the lesson and open-ended questioning, content is relevant and activities are matched to the abilities of the pupils. Teachers were heard to ask, 'How would you feel if ...?' and 'How would doing that make someone feel?' which encouraged good thinking skills. Focused questioning challenges pupils and encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning. Teachers plan their lessons very carefully to match the abilities of the pupils. A good range of differentiated activities ensure that most pupils, including those with special educational needs, are equally engaged and challenged. Nevertheless, there is scope for more creative approaches to stretching and challenging the more able. In an outstanding Year 1 lesson, on 'preparing for Jesus' coming at Christmas', the range of activities provided went beyond differentiation by outcome and included a wide range of activities which stretched and challenged children of all

abilities, including the more able. The lesson involved role play to enact kind or unkind actions for those children who had English as an additional language or emotional behaviour challenges, and the teacher used a puppet with this group to discuss how people might feel and whether the selected action was the correct way to proceed. The more able were asked to describe what was happening in a range of images which depicted kind or unkind actions and then to sort them into whether the pictures would assist them in preparing for Advent or not. In addition, the methods and use of resources such as ICT were precisely judged to engage and extend pupils, including those with additional learning needs. For example, the teacher used striking images of Advent calendars on the interactive whiteboard to reinforce the challenge of pupils preparing their hearts for Jesus' coming through formulating their own Advent promise. However, in lessons judged satisfactory more pace is required and more opportunities to challenge pupils across the ability range, including the most able. Teaching assistants are well prepared and give excellent support to those with special educational needs. One was seen making an important contribution to the assessment process by noting individual pupils' responses during discussions. In contrast to the last inspection, teachers are now confident in using Religious Education levels of attainment and their assessment of pupils' work is more consistent. Evaluative marking now needs to be further developed. Parents are kept informed about their children's progress and the termly Religious Education topics taught. Most teachers include suggestions of ways in which parents can become involved with their children's learning. This is good practice which should be applied consistently across the school. Teachers challenge pupils to think spiritually, ethically and theologically, and to become aware of the demands of religious commitment in everyday life. One parent wrote, 'Our son has made so much progress since starting school. The teachers have great patience and inform us about everything. I am reassured as a parent.'

Quality of the Curriculum

Grade 2

The Religious Education curriculum is good and meets the requirements of the Curriculum Directory for Catholic Schools. Standing at 8.8% in the Foundation Stage and 8.7% in Key Stage 1, the time allocated is below the Bishops' recommendation of 10% of curriculum time. The school uses the 'Here I Am' Religious Education programme and all topics are fully covered. Planning is in line with other curriculum areas and is detailed and thorough, ensuring that pupils develop the knowledge, understanding and skills appropriate for their age, and to increase their understanding of the demands of their faith in everyday life. However, more creative approaches should be employed to stretch and challenge the more able. The school should examine how teachers organise plenaries for drawing together what has been learned and what needs to be remembered, so that pupils of all abilities are more able to progress to the next stage. Good opportunities for spiritual and moral development are incorporated into the curriculum to enable pupils to develop a sense of Church, community and responsibility. The subject is well supported by comprehensive policies on Religious Education and spiritual development. Very good use is made of information and communications technology (ICT) and of cross curricular links to enrich learning in Religious Education; for example, in classroom lessons Google maps are effectively used to place Bible stories in context and music is appropriately selected to reinforce learning that has taken place in the subject. This makes the subject enjoyable and relevant to the lives of the pupils. This results in the Religious Education curriculum making a strong contribution to the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils in the school.

Leadership and management of Religious Education

Grade 2

Leadership of Religious Education is good and the subject co-ordinator works collaboratively with a post holder in the Junior School to enrich provision and enhance transition between the two phases. All members of the school community recognise the significance of Religious Education in all the school does throughout the day. There is clear direction for the subject through appropriate policies and through a focused Religious Education action plan. The Religious Education co-ordinator keeps the subject under constant review and is committed to raising standards. She monitors teaching and learning through a well-planned system of classroom observation and scrutiny of pupils' books. Her constructive feedback has a positive impact on teachers' practice and encourages their continuous development. The process of recognising good practice and identifying areas for improvement is having a direct effect on pupil attainment. The inspectors feel that teachers should now embark upon further development of marking in the subject, so that the good practice of positive feedback, already evident in pupils' books, should be enhanced by indicating what pupils need to do to improve. In addition, this formative marking should be accompanied by sufficient time allocated for pupils to respond to teachers' comments. Moderation of levels of pupils' Religious Education work already takes place within the school and would now benefit from this being extended between Year 2 and Year 3, to ensure consistency across the federation. The co-ordinator keeps up to date with new initiatives by taking full advantage of Diocesan support and training. She shares information with her colleagues through staff meetings and targeted training. All staff are well supported and good opportunities for development enrich their practice and nurture personal spirituality. A good range of resources is now effectively managed and deployed. All staff work hard to create a lively and stimulating environment which reflects the school's mission to celebrate achievement of all kinds. Tracking of pupil progress and monitoring is now embedded and the data is used to identify or address underachievement. Systems for tracking progress can be further enhanced by, for example, using a 'traffic light' system for facilitating the identification of individual pupils in different progress categories. A governor is specifically linked with Religious Education, meets the subject leader on a regular basis, monitors Religious Education through her visits to school and reports back to the governors at sub-committee and full governing body meetings.