



DIOCESE OF BRENTWOOD

Inspection Report

Name of School: St Thomas of Canterbury School

LEA: Thurrock Unitary Authority

Inspection Date: 6th December 2017

Reporting Inspector: Pamela Brannigan

This Inspection was carried out under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of School: Primary
School Category: Voluntary Aided
Age range of pupils: 4 - 11
Gender of pupils: Mixed
Number on roll: 626
Appropriate Authority: The Governing Body
Date of previous inspection: October 2012

School Address:
Ward Avenue
Grays
Essex
RM17 5RW

Tel. No. 01375 375826
Executive Headteacher: Mr C. Birtles
Chair of Governors: Mr A. Name

Information about the school

St Thomas of Canterbury Catholic Primary School is three form entry in Grays, Essex and part of the diocese of Brentwood. It serves the local parish in Grays, with a small number of pupils coming from farther afield. There are currently 626 pupils aged 4-11 on roll and the school is over subscribed. The proportion of Catholic pupils is 79%. Pupils come from a wide range of ethnic groups, the largest being Black African, and the proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is 34%. The number of pupils with special educational needs is around the national average.

Key grades for inspection

1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Requires Improvement 4: Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of this Catholic school

Grade 1

St Thomas of Canterbury is an outstanding Catholic school. It has a strong Catholic ethos which is at the heart of all it does. Outcomes for pupils are very good and the provision for Catholic education is excellent. Opportunities for spiritual and moral development are part of religious education and the wider curriculum. Pupils are given many opportunities to understand what it means to be part of a Catholic community through opportunities for prayer and worship and charitable outreach. Leaders are excellent role models and are fully committed to all aspects of the Catholic life of the school. Teachers and support staff set high expectations for pupil behaviour which is applied throughout the school. Governors are experienced, well informed and well placed to challenge and support. Pastoral care is given a high priority by all members of the school community at every level. The school works closely with other agencies to ensure vulnerable families are given support and the 'Rainbows' bereavement programme also provides support for children who face difficulties. Relationships within the school are very good and pupils interviewed said they feel safe and well cared for. There are many opportunities to develop a wide range of interests through extracurricular activities. Parents welcome the Catholicity of the school and the way their children's prayer life is supported and developed. Pupils' standards of attainment are in line with diocesan expectations.

The school has a very good capacity for sustained improvement. The last inspection in 2012 identified two areas for development both of which have been addressed. The first was to increase multi-cultural display and communication with parents to bring the cultural mix and heritage of the school community into the development of the religious education curriculum. This has been addressed by a range of initiatives which recognise the background of pupils including 'Black History Month' and by using the knowledge and expertise of staff. The second was that pupils should have many more opportunities to be challenged by working independently and leading learning in the classroom. Staff in-service training has ensured that teachers have been enabled to vary the way they plan their lessons to achieve this objective and raise the level of challenge for pupils. Since the last inspection standards in religious education have risen for all groups and pupils are able to self-assess and evaluate their own learning. There are plans to begin moderation meetings with other Catholic schools in the deanery to share judgements and further improve assessment. The school gives a high profile to religious education and has strategies to share good practice and support new teachers.

The executive headteacher, head of school and assistant headteachers have a clear vision for the Catholicity of the school and the central place of prayer, worship and religious education. They ensure that all staff are given opportunities to extend their knowledge and improve their skills through staff meetings and attendance at diocesan led training. Eight teachers hold the CCRS or equivalent qualification and opportunities are given to staff to develop middle management skills. Governors join staff for a day each year when priorities for school development are decided. In addition, they have a major role in evaluating the Catholic life of the school. They are dedicated, have a wide range of expertise and are fully involved in the life of the school through frequent visits and meetings with subject leaders.

The current leadership has a very good capacity to maintain effectiveness. The head of school supported by the executive headteacher and senior staff shows outstanding leadership of the school through the way she ensures that self-evaluation gives staff and governors an accurate understanding of itself as a Catholic community. She is very well supported by all staff. There is a clear focus on prayer and worship throughout the school. The parish priest from Grays is link governor for religious

education and is a frequent visitor to the school. Effective systems are in place to develop and strengthen initiatives which lead to good outcomes for all groups of pupils.

What the school should do to improve further

- Continue to implement the areas identified in the religious education action plan especially those linked to teaching, learning and assessment.

Outcomes for pupils

Grade 1

Both attainment and progress in religious education are very good. From 'below expectations' on entry, pupils make very good progress year on year so that by the time they reach Year 6 attainment reaches diocesan expectations. All lessons observed during the inspection were good and pupils worked with interest and commitment. Pupils spoken to said they like religious education and enjoy a wide variety of activities during the lessons. They work well together whether in groups or pairs. Pupils have a good understanding of the liturgical year and are able to apply religious ideas to their own lives. Workbooks are well presented, show coverage of the curriculum and indicate good progress made by all groups. Pupils spoken to had a good level of understanding of the sacraments, Catholic teaching and moral issues appropriate to their ages. Behaviour for learning is very good and pupils are hard working, polite to adults and each other.

Pupils make an excellent contribution to the Catholic life of the school. The mission statement is on display in every classroom and well known by pupils. There are many opportunities to understand the needs of others in school and the wider community. Pupils are keen to take on responsibilities including membership of the school council, play leaders and prayer monitors. The school supports a range of charities throughout the year including Cafod, Brentwood Catholic Children's Society, British Heart Foundation and Little Haven Children's Hospice. Pupils have a good understanding of the theology underpinning their actions and are encouraged to see themselves as part of a community with responsibilities for other people and the environment. They value the sense of friendship and belonging created within the school.

Prayer and worship are central to school life and have an impact on pupils' understanding of their faith and their personal, moral and spiritual development. All pupils are given many opportunities to participate in assemblies, Masses and collective worship. Each class begins the day with prayers and reflections frequently planned and led by pupils. The centrality of the Church's liturgical year with its seasons and celebrations are leading to a good understanding of the links with the sacraments and life of Christ. Pupils lead the 'Stations of the Cross' during Holy Week and present an Easter play and carol concert for parents and parishioners. Each class has an attractive prayer table which includes religious vocabulary and pupils' work. Pupils are developing the ability to pray in different ways and at different times. They use the traditional prayers of the church, meditation and their own prayers, many examples of which were seen during the inspection. The subject leader has introduced a lunchtime 'Jesus and Me' group where pupils can study scripture and meditate. The parish priest from Grays is a frequent visitor to the school for a programme of class Masses as well as services of Reconciliation during Advent and Lent. As they develop, pupils are able to apply aspects of Jesus' life and teaching to their own lives and understand that a sense of service is part of being a member of a Catholic community.

Pastoral care is very good and shared by all members of staff and governors who work closely together to promote the spiritual development of pupils and the Catholic life of the community. Pupils feel safe, well cared for and know that all members of staff are there to help if they need support. Brentwood Catholic Children's Society provides counselling for pupils with emotional needs. Pupils value their school and all it offers. They know they are respected, listened to and encouraged to help each other. Parents are positive about the school and the care given to their children. They also praise the quality of education and the support given to their children's prayer life. However, a number would like more information about the school's policy for religious education homework.

Leaders and managers

Grade 1

Leadership is outstanding. The executive headteacher and head of school in partnership with the governors demonstrate excellent leadership of the school by the way they direct its Catholic identity through religious education and collective worship and prayer. Staff and governors are all committed to providing the best possible environment for the pupils. The School Improvement Plan gives priority to Catholic Life and religious education. The current system of self-evaluation is detailed and accurate. Senior leaders also help to promote the Church's mission in education by offering support to the deanery and local schools.

Members of the leadership team monitor religious education by means of lesson observations, work scrutiny and joint year group planning which is followed by feedback to individual teachers. The school's tracking system ensures there are no significant gaps in achievement. The subject leader has very good knowledge of areas for development in religious education and is well placed to support colleagues. She models lessons for other members of staff including newly qualified teachers. She attends the deanery group for subject leaders to identify areas of improvement. The impact of rigorous monitoring results in high standards in religious education. The school constantly seeks to put in place strategies to give further challenge to all groups of pupils. Much emphasis is placed on staff development which includes teaching assistants who play a key role in the school.

Governors work closely with senior leadership and have a very good understanding of strengths and areas for development. They receive regular reports updating them on religious education and collective worship. They regularly review the school's aims and periodically review the Mission Statement. Each year they join staff for a day when provision is evaluated and future improvements are planned. The parish priest in his role as link governor ensures that all governors are well informed about the Catholic life of the school. He also offers effective support to staff and visits regularly to act as an additional resource in classroom religious education. Governors are able to challenge and question as well as support. They attend diocesan training to enable them to fulfil their role effectively.

Leaders ensure that the school is a welcoming community where everyone is respected and valued. Diversity is celebrated and pupils are taught to respect other faiths. There are good links with other schools, both deanery and local authority, through visits, sporting and cultural events. Opportunities for spiritual development ensure that pupils are able to reflect on their own lives and experiences. Parents are invited to many school events and are kept well informed about their children's welfare and progress through curriculum information evenings and newsletters which enable them to support their children's education and faith journey. The school makes every effort to maintain and develop parish links which are very strong. This helps pupils, families and parishioners to see school and parish as one community.

Provision

Grade 1

The quality of teaching and learning in religious education is very good. During the inspection lessons observed were good. They are planned carefully with clear learning intentions and an excellent range of activities. The school has made a major investment in resources including class sets of bibles which are supporting pupils' understanding of scripture. Pupils benefit from the high profile given throughout the school to religious education lessons. In all classes observed pupils were engaged and made good progress. Teachers have good subject knowledge and respond well to pupils' comments as they take every opportunity to develop understanding. Very good support by teaching assistants enables all groups of pupils to make progress. Marking is positive and oral comments enable pupils to identify next steps in their learning. A moderated portfolio of assessed work is in the process of being assembled. Very good monitoring, assessment, planning and tracking supports the attainment and progress of all groups of pupils.

The quality of the religious education curriculum is outstanding. At least 10% of curriculum time is devoted to religious education. 'Come and See' is enhanced by the 'Journey in Love' programme. The executive headteacher and head of school give religious education a central place and this is demonstrated by the budget devoted to it and the current level of resources. Engaging religious education displays around the school emphasise the centrality of faith to the work of the community. The curriculum enables pupils to become aware of their responsibility for each other and their environment. It contributes very well to their spiritual and moral development. The school's programme

of retreat days for Year 6 and participation in deanery events supports pupils' faith journey and sense of worth. The support given to families through a wide range of extra-curricular activities also gives a strong sense of community to the school. There is every indication that current high standards are likely to be maintained or improved.

Provision for prayer and worship at St Thomas of Canterbury is excellent. Assemblies and liturgies are well planned and contribute greatly to pupils' spiritual development. They often include visual presentations, bible readings drama, singing and music. During the inspection the head of school led an assembly for Key Stage 1 pupils with the focus on Advent and making a fresh start. She explored Advent themes enabling pupils to make connections with their own lives. Prayer monitors were also involved in bringing in class candles and leading prayers. Pupils are involved in collective worship several times a day in their classrooms and are given opportunities for meditation and personal reflection. Each classroom has a prayer focus with religious artefacts and display boards which include children's work. There is a class Mass every week for which pupils prepare by composing bidding prayers, reading, leading the offertory and as altar servers. Music is strength of the school and singing is of a high standard. There are plans to incorporate reflective areas around the school to offer opportunities for informal prayer. and reflection. Parents, families and parishioners are invited to Masses, other celebrations and attendance is very high. Pupils are given many opportunities to develop their knowledge of Catholic traditions through religious education and the provision for prayer and worship.

The inspector would like to express her thanks and appreciation to all members of the school community for their welcome and openness during the inspection.