



DIOCESE OF BRENTWOOD

Inspection Report



Name of School: St Helen's Catholic Infant School

LEA: Essex

Inspection Date: 21st October 2016

Reporting Inspector: Pamela Brannigan

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

Type of School: Infant
School Category: Voluntary Aided
Age range of pupils: 4 - 7
Gender of pupils: Mixed
Number on roll: 270
Appropriate Authority: The Governing Body
Date of previous inspection: 17th October 2011

School Address:
Sawyers Hall Lane
Brentwood
Essex
CM15 9BY

Tel. No. 01277 215626
Headteacher: Mrs S. F. Rainsford
Chair of Governors: Dr. M. Sutherland Harper

Information about the school

St Helen's Catholic Infant School is three form entry in Brentwood in the county of Essex and part of the diocese of Brentwood. The school serves three parishes: The Cathedral of St Helen in Brentwood; St John the Evangelist and St. Erconwald in Ingatestone; St Margaret of Scotland in Doddinghurst and St Helen in Ongar. There are currently 270 pupils aged 4-7 on roll. The proportion of Catholic pupils is 86%. The majority of pupils are from White British background with 28% coming from a range of other ethnic groups. The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is around the national average and the proportion of pupils with special educational needs is well below this.

Key grades for inspection

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

Overall effectiveness of this Catholic school

Grade 1

St Helen's is an outstanding school. It has a strong Catholic ethos which is underpinned by its mission statement, 'Love One Another.' Outcomes for pupils are very good as is the provision for Catholic education. Opportunities for spiritual and moral development are interwoven through 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 to show responsibility and charitable fund raising. Leaders are very good role models who set high expectations for pupils both in and out of class. 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. Relationships within the school are very good and both pupils and parents appreciate opportunities offered to develop a range of interests through extra-curricular activities. Parents welcome the high standard of religious education, 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 and often exceed diocesan expectations.

The school has a very good capacity for sustained improvement and has put in place systems to ensure its self-evaluation is accurate. The last inspection in 2011 identified no major areas for development other than those in the school improvement plan which related to developing assessment and tracking pupil progress. Since then standards in religious education have risen due careful planning and monitoring by the headteacher who is currently the subject leader. Moderation meetings are held regularly to enable teachers to share judgements with each other. The school gives a high profile to religious education and has put in place strategies to share good practice and support new teachers.

What the school should do to improve further

- Continue to implement the current religious education action plan.
- Review the curriculum information section in the weekly newsletter to include religious education.

Outcomes for pupils

Grade 1

Both attainment and progress in religious education are very good. From their entry to Early Years Reception classes, pupils make very good progress so that by the time they reach the end of Year 2 attainment reaches or exceeds diocesan expectations. All lessons observed during the inspection were good or better and pupils worked with interest and commitment. Pupils spoken to said they like religious education and enjoy a variety of activities during the lessons. In Reception classes a wide range of cross-curricular activities related to Baptism enabled the youngest pupils to understand the concept of welcoming to the family of the Church. In Year 1 classes pupils developed this knowledge with an emphasis on appropriate vocabulary. All pupils work well together in groups or individually and have a good knowledge of the Catholic faith appropriate to their age. Older pupils in Year 2 are also able to apply religious ideas to their own lives. Pupils with additional needs are well supported through differentiated activities and the help of their class teachers and teaching assistants. Workbooks are very well presented, show coverage of the curriculum and indicate good progress made by all groups. Pupils know about the life of St Helen as well as a number of other saints.

Pupils make a very good contribution to the Catholic life of the school. The mission statement, 'Love One Another' is on prominent display in every classroom and well known by all members of the community. Pupils respond very well to opportunities to understand the needs of others in school and the wider community. They are keen to take on responsibilities including as school councillors and as helpers in class, the playground and the dining room. They value the sense of friendship and belonging created within the school. 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.

Prayer and worship are central to school life. Pupils respond very positively to opportunities to develop their faith journey. They are given many opportunities to participate in assemblies and collective worship. Each class begins the day with prayers and reflections and every child has a turn as class 'prayer leader.' All classes have an attractive prayer table which is used as a focus for worship as well as a display board which includes religious vocabulary and pupils' work. All children and adults are represented in the 'St Helen's Cross' which is prominently displayed in the school. The Church's liturgical year with its seasons and celebrations are leading to a good understanding of the links with the life of Christ. Pupils are developing the ability to pray in different ways and at different times. They are learning the traditional prayers of the Church as well as writing their own prayers, many examples of which were seen during the inspection.

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. Pupils value their school and all it offers. They know they are respected, listened to and encouraged to help each other. The school has engaged a counsellor from Brentwood Catholic Children's Society for pupils with particular emotional needs. Responses to a recent questionnaire show that parents think very highly of the school, the headteacher and the care given to their children. They praise the excellent quality of religious education, the support given to their children's prayer life and the commitment and approachability of staff. One parent wrote, 'I am very happy about the Catholic education my daughter receives. All aspects of school life are related to Catholic values.'

Leaders and managers

Grade 1

Leadership is outstanding. The headteacher and her team demonstrate excellent leadership of the school by their commitment to the Church's mission in education and the way they promote a clear Catholic vision to the whole community. This is affirmed by staff and governors who 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 well evidenced, detailed and accurate. The headteacher and deputy head have a very good knowledge of areas for development in religious education and are well placed to support colleagues.

The current leadership has a very good capacity to maintain effectiveness. The experienced headteacher 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 has recognised that the role of subject leader needs to be shared and has formed religious education teams representing each year group. This is already having an impact in enabling new teachers to be well supported. The leadership team has a clear focus on prayer and worship and the parish priest from St Helen's supports them in this and is a frequent visitor to the school. He is also the link governor for religious education with wide experience and is very well placed to inform governors of current provision and areas for development. Effective systems are in place to develop and strengthen initiatives which lead to good outcomes for all groups of pupils.

Senior leaders monitor religious education by means of lesson observations, work scrutiny and joint planning which is followed by feedback to individual teachers. The impact of rigorous monitoring results in high standards in religious education. There is currently a very strong focus on planning and assessment across the year groups to ensure all pupils achieve well. The school is putting in place strategies to give support 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 are actively involved in the life of the school through working closely with senior leadership and frequent visits. They have a very good understanding of strengths and areas for development, and a wide range of expertise. They are well informed about the life of the school through the headteacher's report and their own observations. They also review the School Development Plan at every meeting and access 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 which are taught well. There are very good links with other schools including another diocesan school which has needed support. Pupils are given good opportunities to develop a sense of service through charitable fund raising and involvement in the local community. 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. They appreciate the good level of contact with the school which includes curriculum information evenings and newsletters which enable them to support their children's faith journey. There is also a 'drop in' session every month for talks with the headteacher. The school makes every effort to maintain good links with the pupils' parishes and many staff are involved with Children's Liturgy on Sundays.

Provision

Grade 1

The quality of teaching and learning in religious education is very good. During the inspection lessons observed were good or better. They are planned carefully with clear learning intentions and a varied range of activities. Teachers incorporate religious education into literacy lessons which is leading to very good coverage of the curriculum. Pupils benefit from the high profile given throughout the school to religious education. 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. 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. The headteacher gives religious education a central place in the life of the school and this is demonstrated by the budget devoted to it and the current level of resources. The school has made a major investment in up to date technology which is enhancing religious education lessons through the use of video clips and as a focus for reflection. Attractive religious education displays around the school emphasise the centrality of faith to 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. In conversations pupils referred to the message of Jesus when they talked about charitable fund raising. The support given to families through extra-curricular activities 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 Helen's 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. Celebrations include Nativity and Easter assemblies. In addition, pupils have Reconciliation services in Lent and Advent and attend part of the 40 hours of prayer with the parish in Brentwood Cathedral. During the inspection an assembly to celebrate St Helen's Day included recognition for several other saints through singing, prayers and children's work. Every class contributed to the celebration through telling the life of St Helen and pupils spoken to also demonstrated an understanding of the qualities shown by their house saints. Pupils are involved in collective worship several times a day in their classrooms and are given opportunities for personal reflection. Each classroom has a very attractive prayer focus with religious artefacts and display boards which include children's work. It is anticipated that a newly developed prayer garden will enhance opportunities for informal prayer and reflection. Parents, families and parishioners are invited to many celebrations and attendance is very high. Pupils are given many opportunities to develop their knowledge of Catholic traditions through the collective worship provision in the school.

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.