

DIOCESE OF PLYMOUTH

Department for Formation



**St. Mary's Catholic First School
Folly Lane
Wool BH20 6DS**

URN 113824

**Head Teacher: Mrs Helen Brown
Chair of Governors: Mrs Sue Cox**

**Record of Diocesan Review
9th January, 2012**

Introduction

The school was inspected by Ofsted in October 2011 and was judged to be an outstanding school. A new Section 48 Inspection process is currently being developed for use in diocesan schools. Pending finalisation of this process and as an interim measure, Bishop Budd has given his approval to a formal review to be conducted jointly by a diocesan officer and the school, to meet the requirements of Section 48 of the Education Act 2005. This document is an agreed statement of the outcomes of that review, to be shared with governors, parents and other stakeholders as the school wishes. It identifies some of the key strengths of St. Mary's and also areas of focus that have been agreed to further strengthen the life and work of the school. The review covered a wide range of issues and as a process it sought to be creative and to support the school in its ongoing development as a Catholic community.

The review was conducted by Sarah Adams (Diocesan RE Adviser for Schools) working closely with the Head teacher, the governors and the RE co-ordinator, Karen Cheeseman. The outcomes of the review were agreed on the basis of:-

- documentation made available by the school;
- observation of lessons
- Conversations with children
- Participation in whole school Act of Worship
- Discussion with the Chair of Governors and the Parish Priest
- Meeting with the Head Teacher and RE Leader

Strengths of the School

As a Catholic School St. Mary's has many key strengths which highlight its distinctive identity as a Catholic school, emphasise its educational success and demonstrate its contribution to the Church's mission in education. The list below intends to be illustrative, not comprehensive.

Leadership

Ofsted describes the leadership of St. Mary's as 'extremely skilful' and the whole staff team as dedicated and committed. This was very evident throughout this visit. The Christian message of the Gospel lies at the heart of everything that is done at St Mary's and influences behaviour, attitudes and the way people respond to one another. This is a profoundly Catholic school in the widest possible sense, where everyone strives to live out the ethos and the mission. High standards, a lack of complacency and a desire to achieve the very best for the children in their care make this a very special school.

The past year has been particularly difficult and turbulent as all those connected with the school have waited to hear the outcome of a review to determine the school's future. The leadership team in particular have worked exceptionally hard to ensure that the children have not been compromised at any point by distractions emanating

from the review. Despite the difficult moments within the review the adults have maintained a sense of focus, good humour and a positive attitude. This has ensured that the children have always experienced understanding, appreciation and sound guidance. The school is rightly commended for achieving this. The dedication of the Head Teacher and her deputy to support the staff, parents and children has been key in creating a vibrant and joyful school where everyone feels included and valued.

Religious Life

The religious and spiritual life of St. Mary is a model of Catholic life. On this visit the day began with its regular Monday morning liturgy, an act of worship with the Gospel of Sunday at the heart. Ably led by the Head Teacher the children responded with enthusiasm and energy. As they entered the hall they did so quietly and a reverence that they maintained as they waited for other children to arrive. Gentle music and a beautiful focal point helped to create a prayerful atmosphere. The Head Teacher, ready and waiting for them created a sense of anticipation. Children participated fully in the prayers and responded to questions on the reading thoughtfully. Their singing is of a particularly high standard. Modelling attentiveness and participation the adults ensure that children from the youngest to the oldest know what is expected of them and have developed an excellent capacity for prayerful reflection. This ability to be still and silent is echoed in the classrooms where regular opportunities for reflection are provided by teachers. RE lessons in particular frequently come to an end with shared prayer and ritual based on the topic being taught. As a consequence children do not find silence difficult rather they embrace it with confidence.

Just over a year ago the school had to deal with the sudden death of their parish priest. This was a very sad occasion for everyone but the strength of the school's spiritual life is that children and adults were supported to grieve his loss and express their appreciation of him in prayer and celebration of his life as a school and with the parish. The school now has a new parish priest with whom the school has developed a very positive relationship. They feel very supported by him and enjoy his visits to school for Mass and other liturgies.

Throughout this visit it was very evident that the children not only hear the message of the Gospel but actively live it out in their everyday life. There were many examples throughout the day of children looking out for each other, caring for one another and treating each other with respect. They did this in small but significant ways and without adult intervention. For example in one class the children were asked to talk to their partners. One little boy had no one to talk to and two girls saw this and invited him to join them so that he was not excluded. This kind of behaviour is enhanced by the 'Red Hats Friendship Squad' who keep an eye out for other children at lunchtime and ensure that no one is left alone or isolated.

Teaching of RE

All classes were observed during the course of this visit. Each class was exploring and learning about Christmas from a different angle. All lessons were of a very high standard, well-paced, engaging, and informative. Teachers at St. Mary's are creative

and challenging so that all children progress in their learning. For example in one lesson the children were learning about the role of the angels in the Christmas story. Looking at key words that the angels used and the messages they brought children were able to know and understand how important the angels were. Through drama the teacher was able to ascertain what the children had remembered about the different occasions when the angels came to Mary, Joseph and Zechariah. They were able to identify what kind of message the angels brought and then make links with their own lives to show how they could become messengers of good news. Throughout the lesson the children were enthusiastic and bubbled in their conversation when asked about their RE lessons, enthusing that they are fun and interesting.

In another lesson children were given the opportunity to physically imagine, through movement and their senses, the journey that Mary and Joseph would have taken to get to Bethlehem. Both the teacher and the teaching assistant engaged fully in this imaginative and fun exercise which enabled the children to consider the struggle that they might have had on such a long journey. Following the physical activity the children worked in groups to create fishbone diagrams to compare their experiences and to consider what had helped Mary and Joseph to keep going. Again this was a lively but well contained and fun lesson where children learned to be able to identify one of the key journey associated with the Christmas story.

In another lesson the children had to consider the role and reaction of the shepherds. Through whole class discussion, pair work and group work children were able to identify and discuss the experience of the shepherds so that at the end of the lesson they were able to express their understanding of the different feelings and actions of the shepherds after seeing Jesus for the first time. A creative use of pictures and scripture ensured that this lesson fully engaged all the children and differentiation of activities allowed all children to develop their knowledge and their skills with confidence.

The opportunities offered to develop skills and to gain in knowledge of the Christmas story, spoken of above, was evident in all lessons. In addition the time to reflect prayerfully and to share learning was provided in all lessons and demonstrates how prayer in many forms is integrated into the whole life of the school.

Teachers and teaching assistants, who work unobtrusively but effectively with the teachers, are to be commended for the high standards and quality of teaching they deliver. Teachers are growing in confidence with what is a relatively new RE curriculum and increasing opportunities to consider the theology they are expected to teach, prior to starting a topic will be invaluable in helping them to increase their confidence.

Pastoral Life of the School

The pastoral care demonstrated at St. Mary's is exceptional. It is a small school but it has an above average number of children with additional needs, some of which are quite complex. However, adults and children alike work hard to ensure that every child not only matters but is catered for and cared for. An example of this would be the determination of many of the children to learn sign language in their lunch time

so that they can communicate with children who come to the school with communication difficulties.

Elsewhere around the school there were many examples of children taking the message of the liturgy that day and living it out. Sharing their gifts with one another is a strong aspect of the pastoral care that is shown. Children talked of the security they feel they have in the school and their belief in the adults in the school to look after them and to keep them safe. They expressed their confidence in the adults to be able to help them in difficult times and to show them how to find resolutions when faced with challenges. Expectations within the school are high. Children are clear about what these are and as a consequence feel secure within the structures and confident to be themselves within the boundaries that are set.

The school believes in positive encouragement and offers a reward time at the end of the week for the efforts put in by the children. This is highly valued by the children and something that they look forward to. When difficulties arise these are dealt with gently but firmly.

One of the great strengths of the St. Mary's is its capacity to care for the wider community which it does in many ways. Although the children are very young they have highly developed sense of concern for those who in trouble or less well-off than themselves. Hence it was not surprising to hear that some children in year four were keen to help the people of Japan after the tsunami there. By instigating a number of charitable events the children raised a considerable sum of money for the Japanese. In addition the children are very aware of the work of CAFOD and support this regularly. They enjoy raising money for Children in Need and making shoeboxes for the Samaritans shoebox appeal. Through these various activities the children have a heightened sense of the riches they possess in comparison to many other children throughout the world.

Agreed Areas of Focus for Development

It was agreed that the school's mission as a Catholic School would be further enhanced by focusing planned development in the following areas.

1. During the course of this academic year St. Mary's will be preparing for the transition from being a first school to a Primary school. The Head Teacher, along with governors, parents, parish and the adult community of the school are already well ahead in the planning for the needs that this change will bring about. The most important area for development for the school will be this transition.
2. Now that teachers are more confident with the teaching 'God Matters' the time is right for the school to implement, in line with Diocesan time-lines and guidance, assessment for planning in RE. INSET for this will be provided by the Diocese and there will be an expectation that all schools will be represented at this training. The school has already expressed an interest in

this and there is no reason to presume that they will not be successful with this additional area of development.

Conclusion

As was stated in the last review, St. Mary's is a very successful school which has gone from strength to strength. It is a school where practice is exemplary and where the heart of the Gospel is lived out daily. Children are very happy at St. Mary's and come to school willingly and enthusiastically.

The commitment on the part of the staff and governors to embrace children from all backgrounds and with all abilities makes this a fully inclusive school and one which responds to the mission of the Church in the world.

It is very exciting that more children will be able to benefit from what St. Mary's has to offer as the school grows in its capacity and purpose. The Head Teacher, her deputy and the whole adult community of St. Mary's are to be commended for the open, loving and warm environment that they offer the children on a daily basis. Their dedication is to be highly praised.

I would like to take this opportunity for the warm welcome I received and for all the generous spirit shown to me that helped this visit to be so successful.

Sarah Adams
January 2012