

INSPECTION REPORT

School: The Barlow RC High School and Specialist Science College
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Canonical Inspection under Canon 806 on behalf of the Diocese of Salford
and inspection of Denominational Education under Section 48 of the Education
Act 2005

Date of inspection: May 2011
Date of previous inspection: March 2008
Reporting Inspectors: Anthony Pearson & Theresa Dervin

The Inspection judgements are:	Grade	Explanation of the Grades
Overall Effectiveness of the School	2	
Capacity for Sustained Improvement	2	1 = Outstanding
Outcomes for Pupils	2	2 = Good
Leadership and Management of Catholic Life of the School	1	3 = Satisfactory
Effectiveness of the Provision for Catholic Education	3	4 = Inadequate

Information about the school

The Barlow is an average sized 11-16 voluntary aided high school for girls and boys. It has specialist status as a Science College. Since the previous inspection there have been significant changes to school leadership and governance. 88.6% of the school's 870 pupils are baptised Catholics and the vast majority are of White British heritage. The proportion with special educational needs is slightly higher than average and numbers eligible for free school meals is almost twice the national average. The school serves four local parishes in the south of Manchester but receives pupils from up to 29 primary schools, 13 of which are Catholic schools. 36 of the school's 58.3 full time equivalent teachers are Catholics.

Overall Effectiveness

Grade 2

The Barlow is a good Catholic school in which, since the recent appointment of the current Headteacher, there has been a reinvigoration of its Catholic Life. The quality of leadership and management which has made this happen, including the contribution made by governors is now outstanding and its work is having a significant positive impact so that, for example, the provision for the prayer life of the school, well supported by its chaplaincy, is also now outstanding. Understanding of this reinvigoration is widespread among pupils whose commitment to the newly revised Mission Statement is neatly summarised in their own words as "I believe, so I can achieve" Their contribution to the Catholic life of the school, for example through participation in a wide range of forms of Catholic Action and their response to and participation in the prayer life of the school is good. Pupils' achievement in Religious Education is satisfactory as is the school's provision for it. Leadership and management of curriculum Religious Education is satisfactory but faculty monitoring, evaluation and improvement planning require some improvement in order to raise further standards and stretch pupils more.

Capacity for sustained improvement

Grade 2

Since the previous inspection there have been discernable and rapid improvements to the Catholic life of the school. Planning for improvement has been highly effective and the provision is very well monitored. Action taken to implement areas for improvement in curriculum Religious Education identified at the previous inspection was prompt but in some respects, particularly in curriculum matters has been overtaken by events and is still evolving in response to changing circumstances. The school's senior leaders, who are very strongly committed to securing further improvements, closely monitor progress on these issues. Since the previous inspection, GCSE results in Religious Studies have shown a slowly improving trend. Self evaluation by the faculty is somewhat over generous. The school's self evaluation of its Catholic Life is both detailed and accurate. Taking all factors into consideration therefore, the school has demonstrated that it has a good capacity for continued improvement.

What the school needs to do to improve further

Raise standards and improve pupils' achievement in Religious education by;

- providing more challenging learning activities better matched to pupils' capabilities and increasing the pace of learning in lessons
- improving the quality of the assessment of pupils' work by;

providing written comments on pupils' work which show clearly what they have to do to improve

ensuring that there is greater consistency and accuracy in assessing the levels of pupils' work

- further developing the curriculum to ensure that it appropriately meets the needs of all pupils in both key stages
- adopting a more rigorous approach by the Faculty Leader to monitoring and evaluating all aspects of its work leading to more sharply focussed improvement planning.

How good outcomes are for pupils, taking particular account of variations between different groups

Grade 2

Pupils have developed a strong sense of the school's Catholic mission because of their involvement in recent discussions about its Catholic ethos and because they are kept well informed about it. They have a strong sense of personal values and enjoy opportunities to discuss views, including those on difficult issues concerned with the meaning of life, particularly in Religious Education lessons where this happens routinely. They value and respect the Catholic traditions which permeate the daily life of The Barlow, for example, attendance at voluntary Masses is increasing. There is a very active junior St Vincent de Paul conference whose members enjoy meeting and working on behalf of whose life experiences are different from their own. A strong sense of community goes well beyond the school itself. This is well exemplified by pupils' generous commitment to charitable activity, locally for example through fund raising for "St Joseph's Penny" and the "Cornerstones" project as well as further a field in helping to support the work of a Bolivian orphanage. Pupils treat each other with high levels of respect: "We all get on well with each other". They are quite clear that this is an inclusive school where pupils look after each other, feel very safe and differences of any kind are respected. The school is keen to gather parents' views and the results of the most recent survey indicate a very positive appreciation of the Catholic life of the school.

Parents also believe that the school supports their children's moral and spiritual development well.

Levels of response to and participation in the prayer life of the school are good. Pupils readily volunteer and feel comfortable in leading and participating in prayer and liturgical activities. They have a reverent attitude in both form prayer and assemblies where they have a good experience of both formal and informal prayer. In form prayer observed, pupils readily took responsibility for the direction of prayer activities and clearly understood and empathised with the experiences offered to them. These strengths were also evident in a form Mass attended by one of the inspectors. In a Year 7 assembly, the reverence demonstrated by pupils and the rapt attention paid to the interesting and thought provoking theme and activities provided, was striking.

From a baseline which is slightly below average on entry to the school, pupils make overall satisfactory progress through Years 7 and 8 in learning about Catholic belief and practice and in their capacity to make a personal response to religious issues. For example, in learning about the rosary, pupils also begin to reflect on the part that prayer plays in their own lives. By the time that they leave school the vast majority of pupils, creditably, obtain at least a pass grade in the GCSE in Religious Studies. Although below the national average, results overall are broadly similar to those in achieved in English. Since the previous report, up to 2010, there has been a slight but steady improvement in performance in Religious Studies. Girls' performance has been better than that of boys' until 2010 when boys' results improved markedly. Achievement in the higher "A*-A range is better than in the A*-C range. However, current assessment information indicates that the results of pupils currently in Year 11 will be lower than those obtained in recent years. Good numbers of pupils also obtain at least a pass grade in a short GCSE course in Citizenship, "Faith in Action" Pupils are generally well behaved in their Religious Education lessons and particularly enjoy those learning experiences where they can take an active part. They get on well with their teachers and each other and recognise the way in which Religious Education helps them to make sense of their own lives and contributes to their spiritual and moral development.

How effective the provision is for Catholic Education

Grade 3

The quality of the prayer life provided by the school is outstanding. Prayer underpins the daily life of the school taking as its starting point that reverently shared by teachers at their morning briefing. It is a key part of all school celebrations and meetings. The chaplain uses the liturgical life of the Church to structure prayer life for the academic year and has ensured the creation of a broad range of activities and materials that appropriately supports pupils' liturgical development. Assemblies and other forms of prayer and worship make very good use of ICT, music and drama and, on some occasions, innovatively involve pupils in prayer using foreign languages. Pupils enjoy participation in day and residential retreat experiences provided by the school. Staff and pupils from other faith communities have opportunities to share their

own faith experiences with the pupils and appreciate the way in which the school supports them in meeting their own faith requirements. Pupils are fully aware of the school focus on *spirituality, prayer, attainment and respect* and are quick to share this understanding, for example in conversation with inspectors, by their frequent reference to “SPAR”. The school encourages the presence of governors and parents at the school’s liturgical events and they appreciate this. There is wide recognition of the effectiveness of the work of the chaplaincy in challenging and supporting adults and pupils on their faith journeys and inspiring them to be unselfishly involved in action for the good and care of others.

The Religious Education curriculum is satisfactory. The school has worked with the Diocese to ensure that changes made to curriculum organisation between the two key stages has been done in a way which ensures that Bishops’ Conference requirements are still met. Some innovative development of the curriculum for some older pupils has provided good opportunities for them to broaden their experiences through involvement in Catholic social action and, at the same time, gain an accredited qualification. Changes to assessment arrangements for the AS level course introduced for higher attaining pupils since the previous inspection mean that it can, unfortunately, no longer be offered. The school is now still working to design a curriculum for its older pupils which will effectively meet the needs of all. Consequently, at the moment, it is difficult to effectively evaluate the extent to which the curriculum contributes to pupils’ achievement. The curriculum, however, is enhanced through the school’s rich programme of liturgies, retreat experiences and prayer life in general.

The quality of teaching and learning in Religious Education is satisfactory. Lessons are characterised by good working relationships which means that pupils have the confidence to answer questions and express opinions even when unsure. Teachers routinely use ICT well to enhance learning, for example through displaying well-selected audio-visual resources which capture pupils’ interest. Pupils enjoy the opportunities provided for group work and to engage in active learning tasks. Learning objectives are shared with pupils. Although progress is checked at the end of lessons, opportunities to do so during the lessons are sometimes missed. Activities stimulate interest and encourage active participation but often lead to a pace of learning which is steady rather than rapid. Teachers’ marking though frequent and supportive is inconsistent in its effect, particularly in Years 7 and 8. Some examples of the marking observed, including some from non-specialist teachers, very effectively showed pupils the next steps needed to improve their work. However, marking is sometimes too generous, does not explain what pupils have to do to improve their work and is not used well enough to ensure that future work is adapted to better meet the needs of individual pupils. Together with inconsistencies in the use of faculty assessment procedures this contributes to some lack of clarity about subject performance by the end of Year 8. In contrast, marking of GCSE work is more consistent, helpful and more effectively linked to grade criteria.

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

Grade 1

Since her relatively recent appointment, having made an honest and accurate appreciation of the journey which it needed to make, the Headteacher has successfully led a reinvigoration of the Catholic life of the school. In accomplishing this, she has been very well supported by her committed team of senior leaders and the school's governing body. Key to this success has been the recreation of a mission statement for the school, firmly based on Gospel values. All members of the extended school community have been represented in contributing to this and all are quick to acknowledge the summary of the school's mission in terms of "SPAR". Consequently, all members of the school community understand and are committed to make it a reality in its daily life. Inclusion is at the heart of all that the school does and teachers pupils and parents readily provide testimony to this. The Headteacher ensures that the school's Catholic mission underpins all its development planning and is committed to raising the Catholic profile of the teaching staff. A striking example of the commitment to developing the Catholic life of the school has been the highly positive impact of the newly created, very well regarded chaplaincy. Planning related to the Catholic life of the school is supported by appropriate in service training so that all are clear about the role they have to play. The imaginative involvement of all academic faculties in activities which celebrate and promote the school's Catholic ethos further ensures that its mission is securely embedded in its everyday life. Procedures for evaluating the school's effectiveness take account of the views of all members of the community.

Many members of the school's governing body are relatively new to the role but have quickly developed a vigorous approach to their work in challenging and supporting the school. Governors represent a broad range of appropriate personal experience and skills and are keen to develop their understanding of their role through appropriate training. They have a very strong focus on and concern for both its Catholic ethos and the provision of Religious Education and are very well informed on both. Governors are also strongly concerned to ensure that pupils of all abilities are equipped with the skills to take their place in society as well-informed Catholic adults and that the school itself has a strong positive presence in its local community. Consequently, governance is outstanding.

The work of the school in promoting community cohesion is outstanding. Pupils are quick to acknowledge that their voice is heard and acted upon and appreciate the mutual respect which exists between all members of the school community. A very strong programme of pupil participation in community activities brings them into contact with some of the more vulnerable members of society. During the inspection, a Year 7 pupil taking part in a day retreat experience which involved working for the disadvantaged was moved to wish to share her own lunch with them. Parental involvement in decision-making is promoted through the "Parent Forum". There are opportunities for pupils to have dialogue and collaborate with members of

different faith communities and the school respects and provides for the faith requirements of teachers and pupils who belong to other faith communities. There are productive links with local industry and there is a strong commitment to charitable activity in support of the developing world.

Leadership and management of curriculum Religious Education is satisfactory. Harmonious working relationships exist within the faculty and there is an appropriate division of responsibilities. There is an effective system to assess pupils' capabilities in Religious Education on entry to the school. An ethos has been created which effectively promotes and supports pupils' spiritual and moral development. Though lacking an administrative base, the subject is well resourced. However, faculty monitoring systems are not currently being used systematically or sharply enough to identify and share good practice in teaching and assessment, and tackle weaknesses. Whole school monitoring and evaluation procedures have identified some of the ways in which the subject needs to improve but this is not yet reflected strongly enough in faculty action planning.