

Sandford St Martin's Church of England Voluntary Aided First School

Sandford, Wareham, Dorset
BH20 7AJ

Diocese: Salisbury

Local authority: Dorset

Dates of inspection: 1st December 2011

Date of last inspection: 9th February 2009

School's unique reference number: 113818

Headteacher: Simon Donlon

Inspector's name and number: Carole McCormack (224)

School context

The school has experienced a period of intense turbulence over the last two to three years due to: the reorganisation of the current 3-tier educational system to a 2-tier system; consequent redundancies; and changes in staff and the governing body. The school will become a primary school from September 2012 and this is already having an impact upon the strategic planning for the accommodation and teaching of upper KS2 children. The school has been awarded several national awards including the International Schools Award, Artsmark and Healthy Schools. There is a privately run nursery on site; but a particularly striking aspect of provision is that the school buildings incorporate the local church. This strongly enriches the setting of the school as a distinctive church school.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of Sandford St Martin's as a Church of England school are outstanding

There is an outstanding commitment by staff and governors to bring their vision for the children into being through Christian faith, dedication, honesty, determination and prayer. This selfless dedication has ensured that the children have remained safe and have flourished academically and spiritually despite the turbulence that has surrounded them.

Established strengths

- A powerful partnership between school and governors, placing children securely at the centre of everything the school does.
- A curriculum which is focussed on how children best engage with learning and which nurtures reflection and reasoned response.
- Dedicated and skilful leadership at all levels which supports and promotes the highest expectations of learning and teaching.
- Highly effective pastoral support for staff and children from both the incumbent and the senior leadership.

Focus for development

- To deepen the opportunities for the children to evaluate the impact of collective worship on their own spiritual development.
- To involve the children in planning and developing an outside area which will nurture and support reflection in the new primary school grounds.
- To continue to develop the highly effective assessment and monitoring strategies being used by the religious education (RE) leader and to introduce the new RE syllabus, including staged provision for upper KS2.

The school, through its distinctive Christian character, is outstanding at meeting the needs of all learners

Staff and governors regard themselves as a worshipping community, strengthened by prayer and grounded in their Christian faith. The ex-officio governor expressed this as 'valuing God's love in everything we do.' The headteacher thoughtfully models the role of spiritual leader. He explained that 'despite all the issues, we kept our eye on the children's well-being and progress'. He openly acknowledges the range of difficulties which the school has had to face, but firmly believes that 'all have grown spiritually and professionally' through the challenges of the past few years. The 'school vision' document is exemplary. It details the

school's expectations for each stakeholder, always placing 'child and adult learning at its centre'. This vision is fed by Christian values and grounded in the 'learning roots' of reflection, collaboration, perseverance, creativity and independence. The ways in which this immensely robust vision bears Christian fruit is expressed in a striking display in the entrance hall of the school. Christian values are skilfully and seamlessly woven throughout all provision; and were clearly demonstrated during teaching observations. The clear expectations of the teachers are reflected in the children's behaviour and responses. The children are absolutely secure in their understanding of how to behave; and give concrete examples of the impact of tapping in to the learning roots underpinning provision. One child explained how collaboration leads to making friends; another explained perseverance by quoting the proverb: 'Practice makes perfect.' The children's social responsibility has been enriched by their involvement in practical planning for the new school. Because their opinions are sought and valued, they engage very well with this project and with the other aspects of local and global citizenship that are threaded through learning. Relationships between members of the school community are exemplary. The love of Christ is reflected in the honesty, warmth and openness of relationships between all stakeholders. This makes the school a strikingly secure and nurturing place to be for the children. One parent explained how the school has 'normalised' the complex concepts expressed by the 'learning roots' so that the children are completely comfortable with these expectations. All parents commented upon the approachability of the headteacher; and the relatively new deputy headteacher, who is also the RE leader, was spoken of in particularly warm terms. The school environment clearly reflects Christian distinctiveness. As well as the 'learning roots' display, the Christian values that underpin provision are displayed in the hall. The incorporation of the beautiful local church within the school buildings, however, has the most impact upon the school community in terms of reminding everyone of the church foundation of the school and the presence of Jesus within everyday life. There is currently limited opportunity for the development of the outside environment in order to enhance spiritual development, but this priority for development is encompassed within one of the five current key issues for school development.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

Two of the most striking aspects of the school's outstanding provision are the attitudes and responses of the children across a variety of situations. Children were engaged and excited by the highly interactive structure of the act of worship observed. The school broadly follows 'Values for Life' as a scheme for collective worship; and a range of skilful strategies kept the children's attention and elicited accurate and reasoned responses. The RE leader, who led the observed act of worship, demonstrated thoughtful understanding of the ways in which young children engage with their learning: she commented that 'Worship isn't always about silence.' As a result of her highly effective spiritual leadership within the school, there are rich opportunities for spiritual growth, inspiration and personal affirmation within worship. Because the Church holds a central place (physically) within the school it supports the naturalness of spiritual thought and response in the learners. Although the children orally demonstrate this spirituality, further opportunities should be created for each child to evaluate the impact of the themes explored in worship upon her/his own spiritual development. The school benefits from a variety of visitors who demonstrate in their leadership of worship the rich diversity of Christian tradition. The centrality of the church building within the school together with the values displayed in the school hall emphasise the importance of worship in the daily life of the school. It is through the remarkable coherence of the school vision, however, where worship and prayer, reflection and understanding are woven together to such powerful effect, that the impact of collective worship on the school community is fully demonstrated.

The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding

The school has consistently high levels of attainment and progress and this is reflected in learning and teaching in religious education. The relatively newly-appointed RE leader is highly experienced and her extremely effective leadership of the subject is underpinned by her own faith. She has brought to her role a range of improvement strategies such as assessment for learning; thorough and regular moderation of levels across the school; regular observation and monitoring; and support and development for all staff. These

strategies are already impacting upon the quality of teaching and response in the children. The school currently follows the Dorset Agreed Syllabus and the RE teaching and learning observed demonstrated the consistently high expectations which are in place in the school. In an outstanding KS1 lesson, the children demonstrated a real empathy for the characters in the Christmas story. One child explained that Mary accepted that she was to bear God's son 'because she wanted the world to be right.' Equally the uncertainty of Joseph was attributed to lack of 'trust' on his part. Learning in both lessons was highly active and because of this the children engaged readily and deeply with their learning. Children were sensitively scaffolded to further understanding of profound spiritual concepts. Because the curriculum offers a range of thematic and discrete opportunities for learning in RE, the children's attitudes and responses to this subject are equally as engaged and interested as in any other subject area. Individual need is carefully met through skilful use of teaching assistant support; or through the children being able to access their learning opportunities at a range of levels. It is impossible to single out how RE contributes to the 'spiritual and moral development of all learners' because every aspect of provision, whether planned or unplanned, consistently supports and develops these qualities in all learners. The warm and empathetic attitude demonstrated by the teachers to a range of responses given by the children in all three key stages clearly shows the unconditional Christian acceptance at the heart of the school. This distinctively Christian attitude powerfully models and encourages the development of Christian values in all learners. The school's international work and their partnering with a French school have impacted upon the children's understanding of global cultural differences. This needs to be broadened within a UK context, however, and there are opportunities for planning this into the implementation of the new RE syllabus during 2012 and the introduction of upper KS2 teaching. Monitoring of RE is thorough and highly effective and is bringing about continual evaluation and improvement in all aspects of the subject, but this needs to become fully embedded in order to gain full impact.

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of the school as a church school is outstanding

The concept of servant leadership is at the heart of the school. The detailed vision statement makes this crystal clear: leadership and management 'is undertaken in a context of a clear understanding of the nature of Christian leadership and the priority to serve the school community. It is motivated by the leadership of Jesus Christ and places the needs of others above those of the leader.' One governor explained how the governing body supports the children in 'developing a relationship with God and an awareness of God's presence in all they do in school.' Underlying provision and strengthening it is pro-active prayer: Governors and school staff meet together to prayerfully reflect, praise and petition God in times of great success and equally in times of tragedy. This constantly refreshes the Christian values at the centre of school life. Aspects of the Christian vision at the heart of the school are seen and heard everywhere. Children speak readily of 'Christianity moments' during their learning and leisure times at school; and parents commented on the passion, care and professionalism of the staff during the recent period of turbulence. Governors speak of the 'committed teachers', 'deeply caring headteacher' and children whose actions are 'honest and transparent'. The very powerful vision statement ensures that each stakeholder or post-holder is absolutely clear about the role that she or he plays in ensuring that the school's Christian vision is put into practice and brought into being. For example, some of the expectations for 'adults working in the school' are that they: 'love the questions more than the answers'; 'see people with difficulties not difficult people'; and 'see failure as practice'. Such positive words hold the essence of Christian forgiveness and understanding at their heart. In the recent new headteacher appointment process (for the current leader's successor), governors were firm that the new head must fully support the Christian foundation of the school; and foundation governors within the Purbeck district meet regularly together. Partnerships within the community are outstanding due centrally to the spirit of honesty and openness which has been created within the school. The school is very well-supported by the local church, both directly in terms of pastoral and spiritual support and indirectly through prayer.