

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

Sir Robert Hitcham Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School

School Corner, Debenham, Stowmarket, Suffolk IP14 6PL	
Current SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Diocese	St Edmundsbury and Ipswich
Previous SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Local authority	Suffolk
Date of inspection	19 October 2016
Date of last inspection	11 July 2012
Type of school and unique reference number	Voluntary Aided Primary 124774
Headteacher	Julia van Ek
Inspector's name and number	David Bunkell 815

School context

Since the previous inspection the school has been led by a sequence of headteachers. At the time of her appointment, the current headteacher was the fifth in five years, and she is now in her third year at the school. Debenham is part of a benefice of seven parishes, and currently has an interregnum following the retirement of a well-established rector at Easter 2016. The village also has a Church of England high school, now with academy status.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of Sir Robert Hitcham Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School as a Church of England school are good

- Pupils benefit from high-quality relationships with one another and with adults, recognising this to be as a result of being part of a Christian community.
- Despite living in a largely mono-cultural rural area, pupils show a well-developed understanding and respect for those of other cultures and faiths.
- Governors have a very detailed knowledge of the school, and have been highly effective in supporting staff and helping to support the school's Christian distinctiveness during a period of change in senior staffing.

Areas to improve

- Review the opportunities that pupils have for guided and personal reflection during all times of collective worship, and consider improving the provision of the outside area for pupils to pray or reflect, possibly also establishing an indoor space for the same purpose, to further enhance pupils' spiritual journeys.
- Seek additional ways to make the school more visible as a Christian community in the village, including perhaps trying to add a religious element to the effective links that already exist with the local church high school.

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

Pupils are very much aware that they attend a church school, and spoke about how the emphasis on Christian values makes the school better. In conversation they spoke of the trust and friendship that they have for one another, and are thankful for the responsibilities that they are given. The Christian character of the school emphasises an inclusive approach that welcomes and respects those of other faiths and none. Pupils attributed some of this to a recent 'diversity week' when visiting speakers had shared their culture, faith and religious artefacts. Pupils benefit from the compassion of all adults, and as a result, say that they feel safe and are always prepared to try. Pupils' attainments are broadly in line with national expectations, exceeding these in some areas such as recent Year 2 assessments. Outcomes for pupils who are entitled to Pupil Premium are similar to those of others. Levels of attendance for all pupils including those who might be disadvantaged are higher than the national average and improving, and when any families have problems with regular, punctual attendance a very caring and supportive stance is taken to help them. Rates of pupil exclusion are low, as great patience is shown together with endurance, care and hope that with support all pupils may be enabled to continue at the school. Pupils show a well-developed sense of spirituality, and as a result express their thoughts confidently and clearly, such as when expressing gratitude for their large field with surrounding woodland, as autumn colours change. The vast majority of pupils behave in an exemplary manner, with excellent relationships with each other and adults. Older pupils were seen to help younger ones to enjoy their playtime, and in conversation attributed their positive relationships to the Christian ethos of their school, and to their learning in religious education (RE) lessons. Pupils could explain that Christianity is a world faith, referring to Christians in Africa and other parts of the world. Members of the school council proudly spoke of their role in making cakes as part of a recent successful fundraising event for Macmillan nurses, and of their plans for the forthcoming Children in Need appeal, recognising their Christian duty to care for those less fortunate.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good

Pupils and staff recognise the importance of an opportunity to gather together daily for a time of collective worship (CW). All teachers routinely attend and participate, for example by singing and signing the Lord's Prayer along with the pupils. All teachers partake in the leadership of CW, either for whole school sessions or for a weekly time of worship for pupils divided by age. Pupils participate willingly; in the CW observed performing on instruments as others arrived, then by helping younger pupils to understand a film clip by reading aloud the on-screen text, and later joining in a short time of discussion with others nearby. A pupil read a prayer, and all sang and signed the Lord's Prayer. CW takes place in a multi-purpose hall which is enhanced for CW by the lighting of a candle which is placed on a table with a cross and with a cloth that sometimes equates to the current liturgical colour. In discussion pupils made connections between CW and their behaviour, such as always saying sorry after any minor misdemeanour. It also contributes to their generosity when raising money for charity. CW follows a half-termly Christian theme. It is currently 'courage', and pupils linked this to standing up to any bullying they might encounter. In addition to daily CW, pupils spoke highly of the 'Open the Book' team, an interdenominational group led by the local church who present fortnightly sessions. Other times of CW often also include biblical material. Prayer is always part of CW, sometimes followed by a short time of reflection. Some pupils said that they would like to have quiet places inside and outside the school to be able to pray or reflect at other times. Part of the forest school area can be used for this purpose, but pupils may only go there if an adult is present. Pupils could explain in basic terms the centrality of Jesus Christ in the Trinitarian concept of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. A recently-formed 'Ethos Committee' of pupils has already led some CW, and is beginning to play a part in evaluating the effectiveness of CW, along with monitoring by staff and governors. The committee members oversee the use of a central prayer tree, returning prayers to their writers after a time and ensuring that blank sheets are always available. A member of the local church ordained ministry team leads some CW for children in the nursery and reception classes, often reading and discussing Bible stories with them. Some governors frequently attend CW, on some occasions completing written evaluations afterwards to help bring about improvement. The parish church is used several times each year for school CW, particularly to celebrate major festivals in the church's year. Pupils appreciate the variety that this gives to their experience of worship.

The effectiveness of the religious education is good

Pupils achieve well in religious education (RE), on a par with their attainment in other core subjects, particularly literacy. The Suffolk agreed syllabus for RE is used, so attainment in RE is still measured using the national curriculum levels that are no longer used for other subjects. Progress over time is good. Pupils particularly enjoy using drama in RE lessons, and in one lesson were seen enacting a scene in which people were drowning, while some who had been rescued from a turbulent sea made no attempt to save others. Some pupils showed good reasoning skills as they analysed the situation, interpreting and reflecting on it before stating a viewpoint. Every classroom has a display area for RE, and pupils were able to explain its usefulness to them as a reminder of their

current work in RE, and as a place to display prayers they have written. A long-established teacher has taken on responsibility for leading RE in the school from the start of this term, having had a similar responsibility in the past. Formal observation by senior staff shows that the majority of teaching is of good quality, and staff are deployed to maximise their strengths. Written work and other tasks are assessed as part of planning future work. Staff have visited other church schools to help to develop an accurate and effective assessment system. In discussion pupils showed a good level of knowledge of many key areas of Christianity, although had not always recalled in detail aspects they had not considered for some time. Teaching about Christianity is the biggest part of the curriculum, but pupils understand the need to learn about other world faiths, and spoke confidently about other religions. Pupils recognise the part that a study of RE plays in contributing to their spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development. They are aware that RE contributes to the Christian values of the school, as pupils clearly understand compassion, and for example are enabled themselves to resolve most minor disagreements. The subject leader has already attended a conference about the teaching of RE, and is making full use of diocesan education staff to advise and to help to raise standards further. Staff training in school is used well to ensure that all those who teach RE are able to strive for high standards.

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

The school's vision is 'Learning today, tomorrow, together', and the aims include to try to be 'a school that embraces the Christian faith and values.' Senior staff and governors articulate this in all that they do to ensure that the Christian ethos of the school is at the forefront of every aspect of school life. As a result the well-being of pupils and adults is of paramount importance. The headteacher emphasises the fact that this is a church school to all new prospective parents so that the focus on Christian values and expectations is clear from the start. Self-evaluation is thorough and honest, with improvement plans always referring to the Christian ethos, and governors are fully involved in the process. For example, following the previous inspection and a 'focus for development' recommendation regarding pupils' understanding of the Eucharist, pupils visited the church with the rector for him to talk to them and demonstrate the liturgy. Governors know the school extremely well, with several visiting the school very frequently. Together with senior staff they are planning very carefully for the future success of the school, fully aware of inevitable changes that will come, but not rushing into making rash decisions. The link between effective self-evaluation and planning for future success helps to consolidate good performance for all pupils, regardless of ability or past results. CW, RE and all curriculum planning relate to Christian values, and this influences the pupils' good behaviour and makes an invaluable contribution to their SMSC development. Parents spoken to during the inspection visit were positive about all that the school does for their children, and referred specifically to the beneficial impact of the school's Christian values on behaviour and happiness. Several parents had themselves attended the school as children, and view life at school for the next generation as an extension of their own family. The highly-effective partnership with the local church includes the interdenominational 'Open the Book' team, which contains a member of the ordained ministry team and one of the foundation governors. Prayers for the local church schools are said in the church every Sunday. The school has established useful links with the local community, for example with the village branch of the county library having very recently moved to larger premises on the school site. News about the school appears regularly in a village magazine, but a church magazine for the entire benefice makes no mention of the school. Links are in place for Year 6 pupils to transfer happily to the church high school, but these links do not include recognition that this small community has two church schools. The school has close links with diocesan education staff, and makes effective use of these for advice and relevant staff training. The headteacher regularly attends diocesan headteacher meetings to share good practice. Links also exist with an evangelical church organisation that meets each Sunday in the local leisure centre, but these have lapsed to some extent while that organisation has been without a youth leader; however plans are now in place to re-establish these links. The leadership of CW by the headteacher and that of RE by an experienced senior teacher ensures that good practice is sustained in these areas, where all statutory requirements are met.