

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

Saint Aidan's Church of England Academy

Hundens Lane Darlington DL1 1LL	
Current SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Diocese	Durham
Previous SIAMS inspection grade	Satisfactory
Date of academy conversion	September 2007
Name of multi-academy trust / federation	N/A
Date/s of inspection	16 and 17 October 2017
Date of last inspection	November 2014
Type of school and unique reference number	Academy 135314
Headteacher	Nicole Gibbon
Inspector's name and number	Fiona Ashton 860

School context

St Aidan's Church of England Academy is jointly sponsored by the Church of England and The Crossland Foundation. With 444 students aged 11-16, it is a smaller than average secondary school. Most students are White British and the proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is below average. The academy serves an area facing social and economic challenges. In recent years the academy has experienced significant change. The principal and her leadership team are entirely new since the time of the last SIAMS inspection as are almost all teaching staff. Ofsted judged the academy to require improvements in September 2017.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Aidan's Church of England Academy as a Church of England school are good.

- The governing body is passionate about the academy and underpins all its decisions with a clear sense of Christian justice and concern for the well-being of the students it serves.
- The dedicated, determined and inspirational leadership of the principal and her team brings a purposeful calm to the community. They have high aspirations because they see each student as a unique child of God.
- The newly forged, confident and energetic, staff team shares the principal's vision for the success of the academy and is determined to achieve it.
- Students are caring, honest and increasingly ambitious for themselves and each other. This is because they recognise and respect the investment and confidence that academy staff have in them.

Areas to improve

- Embed the practice of evaluating the academy as a distinctive Church of England academy so that systems that are in their infancy enable the governors and staff to continue the rapid pace of improvement.
- Further develop the themes of collective worship so that they enable students to grow in their understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity.
- Develop opportunities for students to enrich their knowledge and understanding of religion through learning opportunities beyond the classroom.

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

St. Aidan's Church of England Academy is on a trajectory of improvement. It has accomplished a great deal in a short period of time and is determined to complete its journey. Core Christian values that are carefully understood and clearly expressed by staff, visibly drive improvements throughout the academy. Therefore, a legacy of underachievement and mistrust is being dispelled. Staff and students attribute improvements to the firm but fair approach of the principal. Students particularly appreciate the impact that this is having upon their experience of learning and see the academy motto 'We are destined for greatness' as an emerging reality. However, while students at Key Stage 3 now make good academic progress, outcomes at Key Stage 4 are still variable between subjects and overall, below expectation. Academy leaders, who have been accurate in their calculation of outcomes to date, expect Key Stage 4 underachievement to further reduce this year. This is because of the much better teaching and improved learning environment students experience.

Students appreciate that leaders apply forgiveness, justice and reconciliation to decisions about behaviour. They make the connection between this and the example of Jesus Christ. They learn this through worship and classroom conversations. As a result, a calm and purposeful atmosphere pervades the community. Christian values are similarly applied to all relationships which are, therefore, genuinely dignified and supportive. This is clearly demonstrated during the regular 'line up and appreciation' moments that occur during the day. School within a School (SWAS) provision, an in-house alternative to behaviour exclusions, supports vulnerable students and is outstandingly successful in reintegrating them into the main academy community. It achieves this because it nurtures individuals to reflect on their actions and consider their best way forward. This almost always is linked to the practical application of forgiveness and reconciliation. Students recognise the impact of this provision as providing lifelong change. A Year 11 student expressed this as 'I wouldn't be the person I am if I wasn't here.' As a result, withdrawal of students from lessons for misconduct is much reduced. The regular and punctual attendance by a significant minority of students is a continuing concern. However, recent interventions are now making a difference. The most recent data indicates that attendance is currently in line with the national average and significantly better than for the same period in previous years.

Students are proud of the changes that they see in themselves and their academy. They appreciate and look after the environment, they reflect upon the inspirational and often Biblical quotes that decorate the walls and many students have a favourite. This is testimony to the growing spirituality of many of them. The social, moral, spiritual and cultural (SMSC) development of students is clearly promoted and enhanced by their experience of being part of the academy community as well as through the academic and pastoral curriculum.

Students comment positively upon their learning in religious education (RE) and how the new RE teachers help and support them in, and beyond, the subject. They learn about diversity and difference through their lessons, collective worship and links that the local vicar has with a Ugandan community. There is a strong emphasis on the academy 'family' that looks after each other. Students like the daily family dining where staff and students sit together for lunch and chat. It is building students' self-esteem. Similarly, students' aspirations are raised by the notices on classroom doors that tell them where their teachers studied and what their qualifications are. A Year 11 student explained that 'this makes you realise that you too can go to university and you can go anywhere.' The tangible improvements in the academy are summed up by a senior student who stated 'I feel jealous of the Year 7 and 8s because they've only ever had this.'

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good

St Aidan's is a prayerful community where worship is thoughtfully planned and evaluated primarily by the senior leadership team to inspire and nurture the faith of all members of the academy. It follows the liturgical calendar and through music, drama, scripture and reflection it enables students and staff to have a theologically accurate understanding of the person of Jesus and his impact. Similarly, Christian values and the 'fruits of the spirit' are creatively explored using the Bible to promote understanding. The use of the Anglican form of words to call the community to worship is one way in which worship is rooted in the context of the wider church. However, central doctrines such as that of the Trinity are not as well known. The manner in which students gather for worship is respectful and deeply embedded in the daily routines of the academy. The planned weekly theme is explored in each gathering in an age appropriate way.

All staff, as part of their academy induction, receive training so that they know, and have a theologically accurate understanding of, the Christian values that are central to the academy. This ensures that they can articulate the academy's Christian vision and are confident to plan and lead on at least one occasion each year. Staff value this experience. The local incumbent, a regular visitor to the academy, also leads worship. A small group of students, as a result of participation in a prayer spaces initiative, are similarly confident in planning and leading worship. For example, they planned the academy's Harvest worship which was a calm, prayerful and moving experience. Entirely led by students but involving staff, it took as its inspiration 2 Corinthians 9:10 'now he who supplies seeds to the sower... will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.' The generosity and pride with which students contributed to a collection for the local

St Andrew's food bank was evident. Students are excited by the Friday celebration worship that concludes the week's theme. They value the immense focus on celebrating their achievements and receive certificates and applause with genuine pride. Older students in particular speak of how worship has been transformed within the academy by the principal and her team. They look forward to the half termly Class of 92 staff group who add dramatic performances that are enjoyed and celebrated. The academy's faith space is well used both by staff and students as an oasis for quiet contemplation often on a particular theme. For example it was recently transformed so that students could consider the plight of refugees and asylum seekers.

The effectiveness of the religious education is good

At the time of the previous SIAMS inspection RE was judged to be inadequate. It is now taught by an entirely new team and is very well led by the head of department who has high aspirations for students and high expectations of her team. Monitoring is rigorous and ensures that the department is continually reflecting on how to be even more effective. There is a sense of purpose and challenge within the department. Initially the RE team has rightly focused on standards in the classroom. It is now poised to enhance students' overall learning in RE and the department's wider impact upon the academy through experiences of learning beyond the classroom. Older students speak with relief about the improvements in RE. They know that their teachers care about them.

Standards of achievement in RE are very quickly improving. At Key Stage 4 there is a diminishing legacy of underachievement that the RE team are tackling with determination. At Key Stage 3, students are now making rapid and better than expected progress. This improvement is evident for both boys and girls and for students of all abilities. The progress is more rapid than in other core subjects. At both Key Stage 3 (Years 7 and 8) and Key Stage 4 (Years 9-11), the RE curriculum is thoroughly planned, taught and evaluated. Currently Key Stage 4 students are studying Christianity and Buddhism for GCSE. The choice of Buddhism as the second religion is as a result of student voice. RE lessons are carefully planned, appropriate to the age and ability of the students and lead to good progress being made during lessons and over time. In a Year 7 lesson focusing on The Lord's Prayer, students were challenged in their thinking and showed enjoyment and engagement with their learning. In a Year 9 lesson, students used religious vocabulary accurately to consider issues related to capital punishment. The clarity with which students understand their targets in RE and how to achieve them is impressive. Students expect to work hard in RE. They speak highly of their learning in RE both for its variety and level of challenge.

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

Part of the principal's vision is that you can 'feel that St Aidan's is a church school the minute you walk in and for this to be mirrored by students and modelled by staff. This is in fact, already the reality. St Aidan's governors and principal faithfully reflect its mission statement in all of their decisions. As a result, the academy's new confidence is clearly built on the Christian understanding of 'love, forgiveness and reconciliation, integrity and the unique value of each individual.' Following a period of turbulence, and as a result of the strong leadership of the governors and principal, the academy is now a harmonious, improving and deeply caring community. While undertaking an extensive programme of essential staff recruitment governors have made establishing candidates' commitment to the academy's Christian distinctiveness an essential requirement. As a result, new staff approach academy improvement with a single purpose clearly based on Christian values and an holistic view of each young person's well-being. They are clearly focused on enabling students to achieve their full potential academically, spiritually and morally. In this they reflect, and are prepared to provide, the very best church school leadership. A governor commented that it is now 'a joy to hear how staff speak to children'.

The academy is successfully establishing a range of strong and mutually supportive partnerships in order to accelerate its improvements. This includes the diocese, other high schools and the local parish which is well informed about, and prays for, the progress of the academy. The chair of governors uses his professional background to support the RE department and to ensure that other members of the governing body are aware of the standards and progress within RE.

The principal and her team work tirelessly to promote the academy in the local community and already they have enhanced their partnerships with local church primary schools. This is leading to a significant rise in the number of parents choosing the academy for their children. Existing parents are immensely proud of the journey that the academy is making and the positive impact that changes are having upon their children. A group of governors with the principal and some parents and students have reviewed the academy's vision and mission statement. This process, although still in its infancy is now a regular aspect of the academy's self evaluation. It now needs time to embed so that it has even greater strategic impact. Governors have a schedule for revisiting key policies and have recently reviewed those for RE, collective worship and SMSC. All policies are rooted in the academy's Christian distinctiveness and mission statement. The governors and principal have successfully addressed the areas to improve from the previous SIAMS inspection. They ensure that the National Society's challenging Statement of Entitlement for Religious Education is met.