

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

The Abbey Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School

St James's Street, Shaftesbury, SP7 8HQ

Current SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Diocese	Salisbury
Previous SIAMS inspection grade	Outstanding
Local authority	Dorset
Date of inspection	4 October 2017
Date of last inspection	7 September 2012
Type of school and unique reference number	Primary 113850
Headteacher	Louise Sandy
Inspector's name and number	Anna Willcox 915

School context

The Abbey Primary School is a single form entry primary school which serves the town of Shaftesbury and some surrounding villages. The school has 199 children on roll with many coming from outside the catchment area through parental preference. The school has increased in size by 14 pupils since 2012. The majority of learners are of White British origin and the percentage of children with special educational needs is broadly average. Attendance is above the national average. The headteacher's post was made substantive in April 2017 following her role as acting headteacher since January 2016.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of The Abbey CE Primary School as a Church of England school are good

- The school's four core values permeate all aspects of school life and are clearly seen in practice through the impeccable care shown to individual children and their families.
- The senior leaders in the school share a relentless drive and ambition to achieve the best for all the children in the school, meaning the school has continued to move forwards during a period of considerable turbulence.
- Collective worship contributes meaningfully to the children's understanding of prayer and some make use of prayer in their personal lives.
- Religious education (RE) is viewed as a key part of the curriculum. This can be seen through learners' positivity towards RE and the priority given to ongoing review and evaluation of the subject.

Areas to improve

- Make the distinctively Christian nature of the core values explicit so that their biblical foundations are obvious to all members of the school community.
- Formalise a system for routinely monitoring and evaluating the Christian character of the school, including collective worship, in order to bring about measurable improvements which improve outcomes for children.
- Embed newly introduced materials for teaching and assessment in RE and use these to identify, and act on, key areas for improvement to further enhance provision in the subject.

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

'Each child is valued as an individual made in God's image and each one is precious to us' is the clearly articulated view of the headteacher and assistant headteacher of the school. This view is shared by all members of the school community who speak ardently about the love and care shown to individuals and their families. Parents echoed that 'staff go above and beyond to help', that 'they are genuinely interested in the children' and 'want to get to know the whole family'. Deeply embedded values of creativity, care, confidence and community stem from the school's shared vision of 'being the best we can be – living and learning in tune with God'. These values form the foundations of every aspect of the school. Although school leaders articulate clearly how the vision and values are distinctively Christian, children, parents and other staff are unsure about this and relate them to more broadly moral values. Children are clear on how the school helps them to be the best they can be but are not clear on what the second, distinctively Christian, part of the vision statement means. Older children are able to relate the values to different aspect of school and can cite examples of how they help them in their personal lives. Younger children know the values and can give examples of what they mean.

Behaviour in the school is good and adults attribute this to the strong values and the care provided. Children with behavioural difficulties have made rapid progress when moving to the school as a result of individual plans put in place to support them. Children describe the adults in school as 'kind and caring' and staff confirm this when describing feeling 'valued and supported to become the best they can be'. This is evident through the impeccable relationships within the school which are a real strength.

There is a recently renewed focus on the importance of developing children's spirituality. This work is still in the early stages. Children have regular opportunities to reflect in worship and RE and classroom reflection areas have been recently reintroduced. Children describe how others have used these spaces to calm down if they are angry or stressed. The children have a clear sense of right and wrong and talk confidently about expectations for behaviour at the school. They have a strong sense of moral duty. Through RE, children have some understanding of Christianity as a world faith. They have a clear recognition that people are all different and that everyone deserves to be treated with dignity regardless of their background. Religious education contributes to the Christian character of the school through this.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good

Worship is valued and enjoyed by members of the school community. Children of all ages and adults alike participate exuberantly in all elements of collective worship and this creates a strong sense of togetherness. School documentation states the 'pupils have an enthusiastic and joyous approach to singing' which was absolutely obvious during the act of worship observed. Some children are able to talk about how worship helps them. For example, one child described remembering the story of the four friends taking their paralysed friend to Jesus when helping out a friend who was hurt; she said she knew she should help like the four friends did.

The high profile of collective worship is promoted through the attention given to planning. The headteacher and the incumbent review the worship themes termly and plan the following term based on priority areas for development. For example, recently a term's worship planning was based on development of spirituality and another on the concepts of 'Understanding Christianity' following the introduction of this resource. Worship is led by the headteacher, as well as other teachers, the vicar and other visiting groups, including the 'Open the Book' team. Children talk enthusiastically about the contribution that the 'Open the Book' team make and are able to recall many of the stories they have taught them.

Collective worship is explicitly Christian in nature and includes Anglican traditions and key elements such as gathering and sending out to mark the start and end. The act of worship observed gave opportunity to relate the four core values back to the Bible story. Children were able to make links between the story and their values with some support. Collective worship supports the children's understanding of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Learners recognise this focus and older children are able to explain this concept with a developing degree of understanding. Prayer and reflection is central to worship and children respond appropriately during these times. All children, including the youngest, have a good grasp of the purpose of prayer. Two Year 1 children share their understanding of prayer as 'when you talk to God' and being able to sing songs as prayers to God, as well as talking. Some children describe spending time in prayer in their own lives. They give examples of how they say prayers at bedtime and remind their families to say thank you to God before a meal.

School leaders and governors have carried out some monitoring of collective worship and have involved children in this through holding discussions with them. As a result some practical changes have been made including avoiding repeating stories too frequently in worship. Current monitoring lacks structure and focus on the impact of worship which makes it difficult to evaluate its effectiveness and identify areas where improvement is needed.

The effectiveness of the religious education is good

Religious education makes an important contribution to the Christian character of the school and it is enjoyed by learners and teachers alike. Children talk about opportunities to be quiet and still in RE and some identify it as being 'different' to other lessons in this way. Teaching is consistently good and, as a result, achievement in RE is in line with other subject areas. The school uses the Dorset agreed syllabus for RE and has recently supplemented this with the 'Understanding Christianity' resource in order to deepen children's understanding of the Christian faith. Although this work is in its early days, the school has given this resource a high profile using the concepts as a focus for worship and making their own collaged frieze depicting these. Consequently, children are starting to talk with a developing degree of understanding about concepts such as 'the fall' and the gospels. Teachers' planning in RE is thorough and includes many activities to excite and motivate as well as opportunities for deep thinking and reflection. In a Year 4 lesson observed, the teacher demonstrated how God wipes away sin using a scientific experiment where pepper on water was repelled by washing-up liquid. The children were not only fascinated by this but were able to clearly explain what the experiment represented. Class scrapbooks of evidence of learning in RE show a wide variety of activities and thoughtful responses to big questions. The majority of teaching and learning in RE is based on Christianity and as a result children have a good understanding of many Bible stories and Christian beliefs. Children are taught about other world faiths in single units for relatively short periods of time with minimal opportunities to consolidate understanding. Consequently, they can name other world faiths but their knowledge of the main beliefs and practices of these is limited. The new subject leader is enthusiastic, focused and has great potential for leading whole school improvement in RE. She has engaged in thorough and accurate evaluation which is already leading to improvements, particularly regarding assessment. She has recently introduced individual scrapbooks so that teachers are able to use children's work to support assessment of individuals' achievements in each area of study. The document used for tracking children's progress previously in place has been replaced with a new, more manageable system through which areas for improvement and focus can be clearly seen. She has identified the need for additional scrutiny in RE to effectively monitor standards. She and the headteacher have started observing the quality of provision in RE and scrutinising planning and books. It is too soon to see the impact of this work on children's achievement in RE.

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

The unswerving dedication and relentless drive of the headteacher has resulted in continued improvements despite the school facing a challenging period of uncertainty and turbulence. Her focus has remained on enabling all members of the school community to 'be the best they can be' in a safe Christian environment. This passion is shared by the assistant headteacher; the two senior leaders are in tune with one another's thinking and form a highly effective team. They lead by example, living out the school values in all that they do. They are fully aware of what they need to do moving forwards in order to make the Christian distinctiveness of the school more explicit. The leadership team are well supported by a committed governing body who are highly valued by all members of the school community. They are well known by staff, children and parents and clearly know their school well. They live out the values through their work in the school and spend a lot of time helping out with events on a regular basis. These include providing refreshments for parents at meetings, leading worship and even serving the school staff by making them lunch in the church on their training days. Consequently, governors have a good informal overview of what is happening in the school. The clear focus on the school development plan illustrates the high priority school leaders give to the ongoing development of the school's Christian character. Governors have carried out monitoring activities such as parent surveys, questionnaires with children and 'book looks'. There is not a structured or cohesive approach to this monitoring which results in it being difficult to see how it has led to improvement and how it links directly to the school development plan. There is a seamless and highly effective partnership with the local church. This is deeply treasured by all members of the local community. Members of the church serve as 'prayer partners' for each class, acting as a direct link to the church, a friend and a support. Experiencing Easter has been initiated and led by the church to enhance children's depth of understanding of the Easter story. Parents dropping their children at school for the first time are invited to a special service to support them with this transition. This is well attended and parents speak highly of this opportunity. This work and relationship in its entirety heightens the profile of the school's Christian character. Parents are welcomed into school and feel valued as part of the community. Special events are well attended by parents, such as the recent harvest festival where the church was described as 'bursting at the seams'. Although they did not directly attribute it to the Christian character, several parents expressed that they chose The Abbey School for their child because of the 'caring nature' and 'family feel'. Despite planning to retire next year, the headteacher continues to work tirelessly to improve outcomes for pupils. She has supported and nurtured members of staff into leadership roles and ensured that they have professional development opportunities to further advance their skills. Arrangements for RE and collective worship meet statutory requirements.