



INSPECTION REPORT OF DENOMINATIONAL CHARACTER AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

(Under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005)

ST BERNARD'S VOLUNTARY AIDED CATHOLIC GRAMMAR SCHOOL

Langley Road, Slough, SL3 7AF

DfE School No: 871/4700

URN: 110084

Head Teacher: Mr J McAteer
Chair of Governors: Mr P Delaloye

Reporting Inspector: Mrs K Edwards
Associate Inspector: Mrs J Hoarty

Date of Inspection: 23/24 January 2012

Date Report Issued: 6 February 2012

The School is in the Trusteeship of the Diocese and
in partnership with Slough Local Authority

Information about the school

St Bernard's is the only Catholic, mixed, state, voluntary-aided grammar school in the country. There are 51 members of teaching staff, 24 of whom are Catholic (47%). Students are from a mix of socio-economic backgrounds. 80% of students are Roman Catholic with approximately 40% from within Slough. Other students travel from a broad area within a radius of 20 miles. Of the school population of 866, 45.7% are white British, 8.2% Irish, 16.1% from other white backgrounds, 9.4% Indian and 1.3% mixed white and Asian. 6 students claim for free school meals; 26 students are on the SEN register and 4 students are statemented. Attainment on entry is well above that nationally, but the range of attainment on entry is wider than is usually found in selective schools because of St Bernard's denominational nature and because Slough has sufficient places for 45% of secondary aged students to attend a grammar school.

Key grades for inspection

1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Satisfactory 4: Unsatisfactory

Overall effectiveness of this Catholic school

Grade 1

St Bernard's is an outstanding Catholic school. The school achieves both academic excellence and outstanding personal and spiritual development for all students. The leadership provided by the Headteacher is inspirational, and all staff and governors make an outstanding contribution to the Catholic life of the school. Each student is loved and valued in accordance with the school Mission Statement and thus they thrive and flourish in the school. The school provides an exceptional foundation for all students to witness to their faith and to realise their vocation in serving others in adult life. Teaching and learning in RE are outstanding and a highly skilled, superbly led and committed team is dedicated to nurturing students' personal faith. The work of the RE Department is complemented by the exceptional chaplaincy provision which underpins the life of the school.

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

Grade 1

The school's capacity for sustained improvement is excellent. Since the last inspection the school has ensured that parish links have grown and developed. All Year 7 students benefit from projects and Lenten liturgies that take place in their parishes. The school celebrates 'good news' from the parishes, for example confirmations and Parish Priests continue to visit to celebrate Mass and the sacrament of reconciliation. In addition, the school has been used as a social venue by parishes and a joint parish/school venture enabled students to attend World Youth Day last summer. An impressive aspect of the school parish liaison work is the enthusiasm and commitment with which students talk about their ministry and service in their parishes.

The quality of self-evaluation in the school is excellent both in terms of the Catholic life of the school and the work of the RE department. Robust evidence is collected to enable secure judgement, analysis is rigorous and action planning clearly focused and highly effective. Leaders and managers have a shared vision for the Catholic nature of the school which underpins all aspects of their work. The work of the RE department is highly valued and affirmed by the Headteacher. Despite being relatively new in post, the Head of Department has quickly established herself and has an impressive knowledge of her team and the priorities for the department. The senior and middle leadership teams are well placed to continue to provide excellent academic, pastoral, spiritual and moral development for all the students in their care.

What the school should do to improve further

There is already outstanding practice in regular and diagnostic marking and feedback which identifies strengths and weaknesses in students' work. To further increase the impact of this on pupil progress, the department could consider building on the excellent work already established in Year 9. This will ensure that all targets are consistently based on next steps and relevant to future pieces of work.

Outcomes for pupils

Grade 1

Students at St Bernard's take responsibility for each other and volunteer freely and enthusiastically to serve the school and the wider community. They have a strong sense of justice and fairness for all, both within the school and in the context of the wider world. The Sixth Form students are exceptional in terms of witness and role models for younger students, because they live out the Mission Statement through proactive service and the care that they show to others. Year 7 feel that they are welcomed into the school and that they are 'joining a family'. Students are proud of the Catholic tradition of the school and spoke movingly about their sense of belonging and outstanding relationships with teachers.

Students actively participate in the prayer life and collective worship of the school with enthusiasm and due reverence. They take ownership of prayer and two outstanding examples of this are the importance they attach to offering up their own intentions in collective acts of worship and the work of the Forever Rely on God Group. Pupils express their faith confidently and support each other in faith development. They take advantage of the rich chaplaincy provision offered by the school and see it as a natural, enjoyable and fundamental part of school experience.

Students make outstanding progress in RE and their behaviour is exemplary. They are highly engaged in lessons and are curious and collaborative learners. They have the confidence to challenge and pose questions and the ability to think rigorously. They demonstrate outstanding biblical knowledge and the ability to readily understand and articulate concepts using subject specific language. They are able to relate what they learn in lessons to their own lives in a profound and thought provoking way.

Standards of achievement in RE are outstanding. The RE results are amongst the strongest in the school at GCSE. The A*-A pass rate has shown a rapid upward trend over the last three years. Using FFT estimates [The targets based on the performance of students nationally] the RE department's results for 2011 place them in the top 20% of schools nationally. Advanced level results have remained consistently very good and are in line with or above students' ALIS and ALPS targets, based on their prior attainment.

Leaders and Managers

Grade 1

School development priorities are clearly identified and firmly rooted in the Catholic context of the school. There is an outstanding commitment to enabling staff and students to achieve to their full potential. Leaders are highly visible, have clear knowledge and understanding of key priorities and know their teams well.

Formal processes of monitoring and evaluation of provision are detailed, robust and set challenging targets. Importantly, through highly focused performance management, mentoring, coaching and training, staff are supported to give of their best. This is exemplified by the superb way in which the Headteacher works with staff. Leaders and managers are well placed to respond swiftly and intervene appropriately should the need arise.

The provision for Religious Education is monitored in a variety of successful ways. RE has a departmental review as part of the whole school process: there are formal and informal lesson observations, regular sampling of student work, study of assessment data and pupil questionnaires. The information gathered is used to complete a detailed and comprehensive SEF RE and identify priorities for the departmental development plan. It is evident that the departmental planning is set within the context of developmental priorities for the school.

The Governing Body of the school meet fully their statutory duties and go beyond this in offering challenge, support and critical friendship to the senior leadership team. They receive biannual chaplaincy reports which give a detailed picture of this important aspect of the school's life. The link governor has a very good knowledge and understanding of the work of the RE department, chaplaincy provision and the Catholic life of the school. He offers on-going support and affirmation both to staff and pupils and this is highly valued and appreciated. He makes an outstanding contribution to the mission of the school.

Students have a highly developed sense of their school as a community where diversity is celebrated and all are included. Students participate fully in the many wonderful opportunities to serve others in the wider community. Examples include the SVP group, 'One World' project, 'Love in a Box' initiative, CAFOD group, Fairtrade group, and provision of practical help to the Slough Refuge Support Group. The school is also highly responsive to national and international appeals and there is a long term commitment to an exchange programme with students from a South African township school.

Provision

Grade 1

The quality of prayer, collective worship and chaplaincy in the school is outstanding. Resources and activities are creative and inspire high levels of engagement. Staff are given every support in promoting the spiritual development of students, including the organisation of a staff retreat as preparation for the whole school retreat later in the year. The opportunity to use the chapel for Mass, reflection and private prayer is highly valued by students. The weekly whole school assembly taken by the Headteacher gave a wonderful opportunity for students to reflect on their Catholic vocation in their lives and current achievements were affirmed and celebrated.

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is outstanding. Staff plan consistently for exceptional progress and activities challenge students' thinking and raise curious questions. Lessons are characterised by superb relationships and the very highest of expectations. Students' sense of self-worth is nurtured through constant encouragement, praise and affirmation. Teachers use highly effective questioning and interventions to ensure that all students make exceptional progress. Teachers provide a safe and secure environment in which students can explore complex and challenging concepts and, most importantly, relate these to their own lives.

Overall the curriculum meets Bishops' Conference requirements and is appropriate to the needs of all pupils. Furthermore, the creativity and academic rigour of the curriculum ensure that students are challenged and relish learning opportunities. Provision for General RE is exceptional. The topics and material are highly engaging, encourage independent thinking and lead to personal development and skills that will support post-16 students across the whole curriculum and in adult life.

The department has robust systems for the tracking of pupil progress. Any student underachievement is quickly identified and effective, successful intervention strategies are put in place. External assessment outcomes are evaluated and priorities identified to inform development planning.

The inspectors would like to express their thanks and appreciation to all members of the school community for their welcome and openness during the inspection.