

Catholic Diocese of Northampton



Inspection Report of Denominational Character and Religious Education`

(Under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005)

St Michael's Catholic School

DfE School No: 825/4701

URN: 110516

Headteacher: Mr Garret Fay
Chair of Governors: Mrs Maggi Bull

Reporting Inspectors: Mrs Marion Betts and Mrs Jane Crow
Associate Inspector: Mrs Frances Topa

Date of Inspection: 15/16 March 2016

Date and grade of previous inspection: N/A

The School is in the Trusteeship of the Diocese and is directed by
Buckinghamshire Local Education Authority.

Information about the school

St Michael's is a through-school for pupils aged three to eighteen years. It was formed in 2011 through the amalgamation of two schools. There are 1121 pupils on roll of whom 60% are baptised Catholics. A third of all teachers and 55% of the support staff are Catholic. Pupils come from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and a high percentage have English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is below the national average. The majority of the leadership team have been in post for less than three years with the current Principal in post for only ten months.

Key grades for inspection

1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Requires improvement 4: Unsatisfactory

Overall effectiveness of this Catholic school.

Grade 2

St Michael's is a good Catholic school. The Principal and senior leadership team understand the school's strengths and development needs and are highly motivated to strengthen further the Catholic life of their school and RE. They are totally supported in achieving their vision by a very knowledgeable and astute governing body. Provision for the spiritual and moral development of pupils is excellent and the quality of teaching in RE is good. The school's mission is lived out daily by the whole school community and modelled by dedicated staff.

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

Grade 2

The school's capacity for sustained improvement is good. There is no previous inspection report for this newly amalgamated school but appropriate improvement issues from the two founding schools are being addressed with new systems and staff posts formed to bring about needed changes. Chaplaincy is now a particular strength of the school as leadership has committed considerable resources towards employing some staff almost exclusively for chaplaincy work, along with a wider team who are involved to some extent. This includes a member of staff who specialises in counselling vulnerable pupils. Pupils respond readily to opportunities to engage with this inclusive chaplaincy provision and are appreciative of the increased frequency and quality of school liturgies and opportunities to pray. Chaplaincy allows pupils both to strengthen their own faith and experience different forms of spirituality. The provision is strong for both primary and secondary pupils and will be strengthened further by plans to operate as one team across both the primary and secondary phase. Attainment and progress in RE is good and assessment data is used effectively to secure improved outcomes. Differentiation to meet the needs of most pupils is planned for and evident in almost all lessons. Provision at Key Stage 5 is an improving picture. However, accurate and diagnostic marking is still inconsistent across all key stages and needs further action to bring about improvements. The SEFRE is a very honest and comprehensive document and the inspectors concur with the school's self-evaluation judgements. However, it tends to be descriptive rather than the result of rigorous formal monitoring and evaluation and the new format for the school development plan does not overtly identify areas relevant to developing the Catholic life of the school. As a result these areas are known but not routinely included in the regular review processes of governors and senior staff. The school plans to review with all stakeholders, including the pupils and parents the school's mission statement and aims so that it is much more readily known and understood by the whole school community.

The school's leadership is highly motivated, capable and consistently communicates high expectations of school improvement priorities to staff. It is effective and proactive in its support of the RE department and the Catholic ethos of the school. There is a strong capacity for the current leadership to maintain the school's effectiveness and to continue to develop even further.

What the school should do to further improve

- develop a more evaluative review of the Catholic Life of the school with clear links to the school development plan
- ensure that pupils are given precise and detailed written feedback on how to improve in RE and that they are supported in engaging with that feedback

- develop a clear strategy for developing a combined chaplaincy provision across the primary and secondary phase.

Outcomes for pupils

Grade 2

Pupils clearly benefit from the school's Catholic ethos and the Catholic life of the school. The proportion of Catholic pupils is higher in the primary phase than in the secondary but a growing understanding of the Catholic faith and the importance of religious beliefs and values is evident throughout. Pupils understand and appreciate the importance of key celebrations throughout the liturgical year and are reflective and interested in the beliefs of others. At secondary level, the pupils are involved in evaluating how they would like to see liturgies develop. Relationships are warm and reflect true Christian respect and empathy. Pupils particularly mention the welcoming nature of the school community and that all, no matter what their faith background, are accepted as part of God's family. Pupils willingly take on responsibilities such as membership of the school council and supporting younger pupils. Some 6th Form pupils act as Special Ministers of the Eucharist and help out with the Summer School provision to ensure pupils transfer happily from primary to secondary.

Pupils are encouraged to live their lives by following the example of Jesus and this is reflected in their generally very good behaviour and positive attitudes. Pupils praise their RE teachers who encourage them by recognising and celebrating their achievements. The school develops knowledge, skills and attitudes leading pupils to understand the difference between right and wrong and the need to forgive and be forgiven. Pupils mentioned this in relation to the behaviour expectations of the school.

Prayer and worship has a high profile within school life and contributes well to pupils' spiritual and moral development. Pupils both appreciate and benefit from what is taking place. At primary level, all pupils respond fully in chaplaincy activities participating respectfully and with ease. They know many formal prayers and have written some very thoughtful and reflective prayers of their own. Primary pupils particularly enjoy singing to further enrich the experience. At secondary level most pupils engage with confidence and due reverence in worship. They respond especially well when visual material is used and if pupils are involved in preparing and leading prayer. Primary pupils on the school council expressed a desire to be more involved in preparing and planning their own liturgies. Secondary pupils stated that the quality of assemblies and liturgies was good and that all staff, Catholic and non-Catholic strongly promoted the Catholic ethos of the school encouraging pupils to be better people and more Christ like. However, they would like more consistency across tutor group prayers where use of the very good chaplaincy support materials was variable.

Chaplaincy across the whole school provides very effective spiritual and pastoral support to staff and pupils, contributing significantly to the well-being of individuals. The school leadership has invested heavily in this area ensuring that both primary and secondary pupils experience a rich diet of chaplaincy activities and many participate fully. All pupils are aware how to access support if they need it and that they are certain of a positive response. There is a large and varied team of specialists in the secondary phase ensuring that individual needs of children are well-catered for by experienced staff.

Pupils achieve good standards in Religious Education which are mainly above average. Across the primary phase pupils make steady progress and nearly all achieve the expected levels; some achieve higher and the RE outcomes compare favourably with other core subjects. Pupils enjoy their religious education lessons especially when given practical and creative tasks to motivate their learning such as drama and "ashing" their repentance prayers. They also appreciate the opportunities to discuss their own ideas and opinions with others. They identify RE as extremely important and pupils explained "because we learn how God wants us to be".

In the secondary phase, progress is good as a result of good teaching. The pupils' positive attitude towards learning was witnessed during lesson observations and pupils in the school council talked enthusiastically about teaching and learning in RE lessons. Outcomes at secondary level are good overall and predictions based on the progress data of current pupils continues in an upward trend. The 3-year trend at A level is less than satisfactory and results in 2015 were negatively affected by staffing issues. This has since been resolved and the current Year 13 pupils, who achieved AS results in line with the top 10% of RE pupils nationally, are on track to maintain this position at A level in 2016. At GCSE the percentage of pupils making expected and greater than expected progress is above average with an increasing 3-year trend. As a result attainment is good, above the national average and improving. Results in RE are generally better than GCSE results in other subjects across the school

curriculum. The department has introduced a new system of tracking pupil progress at Key Stage 3 in response to changing specifications. Although in its early stages, the assessments indicate most pupils are making good progress.

Leaders and managers

Grade 2

Leadership at all levels is good. A dedicated Principal and SLT team, ably assisted by experienced governors who know the school well, demonstrate a deep commitment to the Church's mission. The governing body provides both challenge and support for the Catholic dimension of school life and is whole heartedly committed to the success of the school. A strong Catholic identity permeates the school's daily life ensuring pupils experience a rich offer of prayer, collective worship, chaplaincy and religious education. Staff and pupils testify to the commitment of the leadership team to prioritise resources on this aspect of school life, resulting in effective promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral and social development and faith awareness. They demonstrate an uncompromising drive for pupils to achieve their full educational potential and as a result the majority of parents responded positively to the inspection questionnaire. Although leadership know the school's major strengths and areas for development in respect to its Catholic character, appropriate systems are not yet in place for regular evaluations to feed fully into school development planning. Pupils say they are proud of their school and have a high regard for its Catholic ethos. However, greater involvement in shaping and developing the mission statement and aims of the school would help them in clearly articulating the school's distinctive mission.

Religious Education leaders across the school are dedicated to their role and committed to the high profile given to RE. The Vice Principal, Assistant Vice Principal linked to the RE department and Secondary Subject Leader are very positive role models for their staff who appreciate their expertise, support and guidance. The Vice Principal, plans strategically to ensure support for non-Catholic staff in the primary phase. At secondary level, the RE Subject Leader has instigated a programme of 'drop-ins' to monitor standards of teaching but also to support new members of the profession and staff transferring from the education systems of other countries. Pupils are assessed regularly, and RE progress is tracked in detail. As a result outcomes throughout are good and improving. The primary diocesan RE advisor's guidance is sought to ensure consistency of judgements and appropriate marking responses. Governors receive detailed reports concerning the RE curriculum and the monitoring of pupil achievement data in regular 'Health Checks'. The RE budget provided is in line with that given to other core subjects.

Provision

Grade 2

Worship and prayer are central to the school's life for both pupils and staff. The chaplaincy team is a strong combination of experience and youthful enthusiasm and provides a broad richness of prayer, retreats, sacraments and worship linking to Catholic traditions as well as including extra activities to promote individual reflective experiences. For example, during Lent pupils have the opportunity to experience the Stations of the Cross in a way which skilfully engages their attention and promotes deep reflection on the Passion of Our Lord. Themes of worship reflect Sunday's gospel readings and the liturgical year. Those with different religious beliefs are supported in practicing their own faith resulting in an inclusive and tolerant community. Statutory requirements to hold a daily act of worship are fulfilled through morning prayers, acts of collective worship and assemblies. In the secondary phase, these are ably co-ordinated through the chaplaincy team although delivery by form tutors is variable. In the primary phase, the Vice Principal co-ordinates the daily acts of collective worship which she and the primary Assistant Vice Principal deliver. Attractive prayer stations provide the focus for class prayer and religious artefacts have been chosen with care. Secondary pupils explained how their class cross was made during a Year 7 retreat to remind us that the 'whole is greater than the sum of the parts'. Chaplaincy in the school powerfully promotes pupils' spiritual development and is clearly understood and accessible to all members of the community. As St Michael's continues to develop its 'through school' provision, the chaplaincy team has outstanding potential to enrich the offer to pupils further, through planned liturgical formation across the full age range.

The quality of religious education lessons across the whole school is good and some lessons observed were outstanding. Where RE lessons were best, teachers were confident to input rigorous RE content,

lessons were well planned with clear learning objectives and work was differentiated to meet the needs of pupils with special educational needs and those with English as an additional language. Pupils were motivated to learn by visual demonstrations and practical activities. Talking partners ensured thoughtful reflection and the relationships between the pupils and their teachers were strong, creating a positive climate for learning. In the primary phase the more able pupils were sufficiently challenged to achieve well but this was less evident in the secondary phase. Regular lesson observations, work sampling, along with careful data analysis, ensures that consistently good standards of teaching and learning are maintained. Assessments are made regularly and analysed centrally. Data is used effectively by the RE subject leader in the secondary phase to track pupil progress towards targets and inform intervention work. She is an excellent teacher and models high standards to all her colleagues. Across Key Stage 3, steps to record progress more accurately are being introduced. The presentation of RE books is good evidencing a good variety of written work and the high expectations of the teachers. However, although in both primary and secondary phases there are examples of good marking with incisive comments which encourage pupils to engage and extend their learning, this is not consistent practice or supported by a clear policy.

The quality of the curriculum is good, and suitable for the age and abilities of the learners. It fulfils the requirements of the Bishops' Conference and 10% of curriculum time is used for religious education at all key stages, following diocesan directed programmes. In the primary phase, scripture is used well during much of the teaching but work using Bible research was not observed. RE teaching is often linked to learning in other curriculum areas particularly to literacy, drama, and art and there is good liaison with the chaplaincy team. At Key Stage 5, General RE is taught by the chaplaincy team giving them a chance for regular dialogue with the older pupils. Hence the curriculum contributes well to pupils' spiritual and moral development and it raises pupils' awareness of other faiths. Pupils' books evidenced a satisfactory coverage of the curriculum.

The inspectors wish to thank the senior leaders, staff and pupils for their very warm welcome and for contributing to their informative and enjoyable visit.

Marion Betts, Jane Crow and Frances Topa