

Catholic Diocese of Northampton



**INSPECTION REPORT OF DENOMINATIONAL
CHARACTER AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**
(Under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005)

**ST PAUL'S VOLUNTARY AIDED
CATHOLIC SECONDARY SCHOOL**

Phoenix Drive, Leadenhall
Milton Keynes, MK5 5EN

DfES School No: 826/4702
URN: 110517

Head Teacher: Mrs Jo-Anne Hoarty
Chair of Governors: Mr Paul Herbert

Reporting Inspector: Mr John Shinkwin,

Date of Inspection: 26 June 2019

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

Information about the school

St. Paul's is a large 11-18 mixed secondary school (1792 pupils), the only faith secondary school in Milton Keynes. With the removal of free transport for faith schools, more children are admitted from its immediate environs, which includes areas of social deprivation so a significant minority receive the Pupil Premium. As a result, over 5 years, there has been an increase in the proportion of pupils for whom English is a second language (from 42% to 50%) and a decline in the proportion of Catholics (from 70% to 54%). This trend is now being reversed through an effective outreach programme to Catholic primary schools - in September, 58% of new pupils will be from Catholic primary schools compared with 42% only three years ago. The school takes seriously its commitment to the most vulnerable and hosts three special needs departments on behalf of the local authority: hearing impaired, visually impaired and for autism spectrum disordered [ASD] pupils, catering for a total of 48 pupils. These pupils are fully integrated into the school's social and academic life. The school continues to be enriched by its outstanding School Centred Initial Teacher Training Provision. Staff turnover is remarkably low, reflecting the staff's love of the school and the quality of its leadership.

Key grades for inspection

1: Outstanding

2: Good

3: Satisfactory

4: Unsatisfactory

Overall effectiveness of this Catholic school

Grade 1

This is an outstanding Catholic school. The school has a clear identity as a Christ-centred school and its Catholic life is vibrant; the religious education is excellent and collective worship is meaningful and relevant to young people. The leadership is very strong at all levels and governors support the school with dedication and expertise. A strong sense of community and belonging creates a very positive backdrop to all that goes on in the school. There is harmony and purposefulness throughout the day with the pupils responding to the love and professionalism of the staff. Responses from parents endorse this with comments such as "Pastoral care and a real understanding of each individual is what sets this school apart from other local secondary schools." St Paul's is a school where the talents, personal qualities and faith of its pupils can blossom.

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

Grade 1

The school has made excellent progress since the last Section 48 inspection in March 2014 during which time the current headteacher has been appointed, building on the legacy of the previous headteacher and adding fresh impetus to the school's progression. Her warmth and encouragement of staff and pupils set a very positive tone in the school. Progress has been most evident in two areas: raising academic standards and in reaffirming the school's mission: St Paul's School is an active embodiment of its mission statement "Love, Serve, Do the Best that is Possible".

The leadership has an ambitious vision for the school and is deeply committed to its Catholic character. There is a great thoroughness and attention to detail in the school's self-evaluation and the development plan identifies clear areas for enacting ever improving effectiveness. Even in the time since the interim monitoring visit, recommendations are being acted upon. Stretching all pupils, including the most able, is a key feature – evidence for its success are the four students who have received Oxbridge offers this year, including one from a vulnerable group.

The two suggestions for improvement from the last inspection "Continue to use assessment for learning initiatives to raise attainment" and "Further develop literacy techniques in the religious education classroom" have been comprehensively addressed. Successful assessment for learning approaches include a variety of styles of peer and self-assessment, book check reflections, a traffic light system and exit cards at the end of lessons. The RE department follows whole school initiatives to develop literacy. They work on specific requirements of GCSE and A level exams e.g. Point, Explain, Evidence and Argument Counter Argument, Response. There is a focus on subject specific vocabulary, including making sure key words are understood and the skills of reading and analysing complex text. The school's capacity for sustained improvement is excellent.

What the school should do to improve further

- Continue to develop creative ways of supporting children in their learning, especially harnessing support from parents, e.g. webinars and podcasts, so that parents can access them at a time which suits their work schedules
- With appropriate support, develop further opportunities for students to speak to audiences in parishes and primary schools in the school's outreach programme
- Continue to create more opportunities for silent reflection
- As indoors, enhance the outdoor spaces with attractive symbols of the Catholic faith

Catholic Life

Grade 1

Pupils contribute wholeheartedly to and value the Catholic life of the school. They feel well supported personally within the culture of care and palpable sense of community which pervade the school. A wealth of opportunities is available including annual form group retreats in Years 7, 8 and 9 for which the pupils develop their own themes; a group was away at Buckden Towers for a three-day residential retreat at the time of the inspection. Pupils regularly attend productions of *The Life of Christ* at Wintershall and are deeply moved by it. Post-16 students are valuable team members in the diocesan pilgrimage to Lourdes. There is a great cultural diversity amongst the pupils, who are very respectful of each other. Pupils collaborate well with each other. This is aided by the wide range of extra-curricular activities on offer, especially in sport, drama and music. School trips, which are also very popular, contribute to building community spirit. The school has developed a strong culture of service to others. Excellent work is done with the diocesan CAFOD team who were observed working with a Year 8 group; this deepens their understanding of world issues. There is a great generosity of spirit which is especially evident in fund-raising for a variety of charities chosen by the students and by their support for the Milton Keynes Foodbank.

"Love, Serve, Do the Best that is Possible" is a practical mission statement, related to the teaching of St Paul, and is understood and practised by all. The "Gifts We Grow" qualities derive from the mission statement and, with a focus on two of these qualities each term, a deep understanding of their meaning develops as pupils move up the school; an excellent reflection of two of these qualities was observed. The Catholic identity of the school is reinforced by the display of posters around the school and prayer corners in classrooms. The school has a thriving chaplaincy with eight full time chaplaincy/pastoral assistants who perform a key role. Such an allocation of the school's resources speaks volumes for the priority of Catholic life in this community and the commitment of its leadership. Relationships between staff and students are excellent. Students trust staff and appreciate them. Staff 'go the extra mile' to ensure that pupils are able to reach their full potential. Staff care for each other. Pupils conduct themselves in an exemplary manner which contributes very positively to the learning environment; this reflects the care for them shown by the staff and the Gospel values of love and service which permeate all aspects of school life. Supported by external training where appropriate, Personal, Social, Health and Economic education, Relationships and Sex Education and Spiritual and Moral education are conducted in a manner which celebrates Catholic teaching and principles.

The leadership team is a united group which is deeply committed to the Church's mission in education. Having an assistant head post responsible for developing the Catholic nature of the school signals its importance. Governors give generously of their time and expertise. Ambitious year on year improvement plans are drawn up in consultation with the leadership team and progress is reviewed at the end of the year when governors and the leadership team hold a strategy meeting to review the curriculum and all aspects of provision. There is a commitment to on-going professional development with an encouragement to do the MA in Catholic Leadership and CCRS for which courses are hosted at St Paul's. A rigorous self-evaluation and development planning process at all levels ensures that all staff and governors are aware of the school's strengths and area for development. A formal system of teaching reviews, which leads to specific actions for development, takes place in each department each term, including the chaplaincy team who produce an annual report to governors. There is a spirit of openness and honesty and students contribute to the evaluation of the work. The headteacher uses pupil and staff forums to gather evidence about the impact of key actions. Leaders are a source of inspiration for the whole community. The school is outward-looking, striving to support those in need in the local community and beyond. This is not only evident in fund-raising, which is impressive; there is

an emphasis on “Faith in Action” with students actively supporting projects e.g. with CAFOD – they are outstanding role models for younger children. St Paul’s School provides leadership and is a hub for events and activities in the diocese.

Religious Education

Grade 1

A significant proportion of lessons are outstanding and all teaching in RE is at least good. There is a high level of challenge and pupils can articulate their strengths and next steps with confidence. Year 11 students across all abilities were observed wrestling with Theodicy – how can evil coexist with a loving and all-powerful God? Pupils are fluent in using religious subject terminology and this is evident in all aspects of their work both oral and written. Supported by the Teaching to the Top initiative, which is raising standards across the school, achievement in GCSE RS is high with RS gaining the highest number achieving Grade 9 (10), Grade 8 (18) and Grade 7 (28) with pleasing value-added overall (+0.18). Children with particular needs are educated in smaller groups where they are taught with sensitivity and encouragement. After a consistently high uptake of A level RS over the years, numbers had dipped recently owing to the change from four to three A level subjects in Year 12; they are now rising significantly. There are exciting modules in the Sixth Form General RE programme which enthuse the students. Each Post-16 student is allocated an academic mentor who works with them to monitor progress and set targets - results are very good. A strong platform is laid for public examinations by a well-planned KS3 curriculum with searching assessment after each topic. It is a great strength of the school that almost all groups of pupils, including pupil premium, black African and those with special educational needs, are making progress comparable to or better than the progress of other pupils.

The strong teamwork in the department enables consistently high quality teaching which the pupils enjoy. Pupils comment: ‘We are always challenged.’ ‘We are allowed to have our own opinions and we are encouraged to question others’ views.’ ‘Quizzes help me to enjoy and learn in RE. They make me realise what I have to work on.’ ‘We are encouraged to work independently and think for ourselves’. In Years 7-11, effective assessment, based on GCSE criteria, is embedded into the modules of work. A lot of work has been done to ensure consistency of assessment so pupils have a good understanding of where they stand and what they need to make further progress. Homework is marked regularly and useful feedback is given. The RE curriculum is embedded and evident in all schemes of learning and resources. It is varied, broad and balanced and relevant to pupils across the ability range, who find it engaging and interesting. The department is well resourced and has a suite of six classrooms and seven specialist RE teachers. The department works closely with the diocese.

The faculty structure ensures that over half of the leadership team have a hands-on approach to learning and teaching which keeps them well connected with day to day classroom practice. The assistant headteacher, head of department and second in charge conduct a teaching review each term which feeds into the monitoring and evaluation process. This involves a triangulation of information based on lesson observation, book scrutiny and progress data analysis. Leaders and governors have a secure understanding of the performance of the RE department through a combination of departmental visits, progress monitoring, review of exam results, external verification with school improvement partners and departmental visits. The governors scrutinise the curriculum, including Developing the Catholic Nature of the School action plans, through the Curriculum and Teaching Committee which meets half termly. The head of department is very effective and colleagues enjoy working for her. She is well organised, leads by example and is very focussed on quality of learning and teaching. There is excellent formal and informal communication within the department. Pupil progress data from assessment is used to monitor progress and prompts swift intervention if the need arises. Specification choices suit the pupils at St. Paul’s and the option choices fulfil the requirements from the Bishops’ Conference.

Prayer with pupils and staff is an integral and important part of our daily routine. Excellent resources for prayer are available and staff are trained in the different ways in which they can pray with young people - students respond very positively to this. Voluntary and well-attended chapel liturgies are held during the year - themes have included Prisoners Week, World Aids Day and Abolition of Slavery. Form prayer is a very important part of daily life and, since September 2016, a prayer bell sounds two minutes before the end of the day so that all classes finish with an appropriate prayer. Pupils play an active part in leading celebrations and prayer, especially the team of Post-16 Eucharistic Ministers, who are excellent role models to the rest of the school. Form groups take responsibility for planning and delivering collective worship.

The chaplaincy team plan and prepare spiritually engaging liturgical and sacramental experiences which contributes to the spiritual and moral development of pupils. The school is conscious that the development of a young person's spirituality is part of a unique and individual journey and tries hard to create liturgies which are meaningful and relevant to the different needs. Collective worship is closely linked to scripture and the liturgical calendar and whole school Masses are celebrated throughout the year, reflecting the feasts and seasons. Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is offered during Advent and Lent when the Stations of the Cross is also available. Reflections of memory are offered on All Saints Day and the Rosary is said during May. Masses of celebration to mark the end of each key stage are extremely well attended by pupils, parents and staff, as is the Year 7 New Intake Mass.

All leaders promote the Catholic ethos of the school and lead by example by taking collective worship on regular basis. All staff linked to a year group attend collective worship and so learn from this good practice. Staff pray together each morning at briefing and in the chapel on Monday afternoons. All meetings begin or end with prayer. With every year group having a full-time member of the chaplaincy team, all of whom are very skilled at leading worship, there is excellent support for teachers in leading prayer. The liturgical rhythms of a Catholic community are well integrated into school life.

The inspector wishes to thank the headteacher, staff and students for their welcome and contributions during the inspection.