

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

Darwen St James' Church of England Primary Academy	
St James' Crescent, Darwen, Lancashire BB3 0EY	
Current SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Diocese	Blackburn
Previous SIAMS inspection grade	Outstanding
Date of academy conversion	1 October 2014
Name of multi-academy trust	Cidari
Date of inspection	27 April 2017
Date of last inspection	December 2011
Type of school and unique reference number	Voluntary Aided 140891
Headteacher	Maggie Beck
Inspector's name and number	Lesley Brookbanks 771

School context

Darwen St James Primary School converted to academy status in October 2014 as part of Blackburn Diocesan Multi Academy Trust (MAT) CIDARI. It has 140 primary age pupils and 37 nursery places. The proportion of pupils for whom the school receives extra funding due to social disadvantage is well above the national average. The number of pupils identified with special educational needs and disability is above the national average. Most pupils are of White British background. The parish has recently expanded following the amalgamation of three local parishes, each with a church school. The new incumbent is the priest-in-charge.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of Darwen St James' as a Church of England Academy are good

- Distinctively Christian values are at the heart of the academy's work. They strongly influence pupils' behaviour and attitudes and result in a calm and nurturing learning environment.
- Relationships within the academy are exemplary at all levels, firmly underpinned by its Christian vision, 'working together to love, to learn, to live' which is known and understood by the whole school community.
- The headteacher and leadership team lead the school through Christian example so that a very strong Christian ethos is effectively modelled and promoted.
- Worship is central to the life of the school and valued by all members of the community. It contributes to the moral and social development of pupils and influences their day to day decision making.

Areas to improve

- Raise expectations in religious education (RE) so that there is greater consistency in standards and progress across the school.
- Ensure that learning in RE includes a balance between learning about religion and learning from religion. This will enable pupils to deepen their understanding and spiritual response and engage with big questions of faith, through enquiry and reflection.
- Develop and embed pupils' understanding of Anglican practice and involve them in planning and leading their own acts of worship to deepen their spiritual understanding.

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

The Christian vision for the academy is 'to treasure and love every individual, for pupils to have a thirst for learning, love for life and embrace the future with Christian hope and confidence'. Its mission statement is 'working together, to love, to learn, to live'. These two impressive statements of intent are at the very heart of the academy's work. Pastoral support through Christian love and care is exemplary. Although overall attainment is below national expectation, the academy works hard to help pupils make good progress from their starting points. The academy provides a safe and secure learning environment where pupils enjoy learning. The needs of the most vulnerable pupils and their families are effectively met. The academy often goes the extra mile to make this happen. Pupil well-being coordinators offer practical help and support through providing breakfast club, a foodbank and working directly with families. The school actively promotes good attendance and issues with absence, punctuality and behaviour are dealt with sensitively and with understanding.

Christian values of thankfulness, trust, perseverance, justice, friendship and respect underpin all aspects of academy life. Pupils confidently explain how these values help them to make right choices in their daily lives. A green sweatshirt is awarded for a member of each class to wear recognising their contribution to the school's Christian values. The St James' child award is also highly regarded. Pupils work extremely hard to achieve the six criteria necessary for the award, all relating to the academy's Christian character. The quality of pupil's behaviour and relationships at all levels are rooted in respect and Christian values. Consequently, pupils are calm and extremely well-behaved and care for each other very well. They are confident that rare incidences of unacceptable behaviour will be dealt with fairly by adults.

The Christian character of the academy is celebrated throughout its learning environment. RE and worship displays, Christian artefacts and prayer and Christian values areas provide a meaningful focus. Pupils enjoy writing prayers for prayer boxes to share with their class. The academy is further developing pupil's engagement with personal prayer and spirituality through provision of an outdoor prayer space. The academy is actively developing pupil's knowledge and understanding of multicultural Christianity and other faith communities. Parents appreciate sharing special days when they participate in classroom activities with their children, for example on the theme of Easter. They enjoy Friday coffee mornings which enable them to meet together after school worship. This enables new families to quickly feel part of the school community. Parents value the school's welcoming Christian ethos and values, one commenting, 'This school accepts children as they are, my child feels safe, loved and understood'.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good

Collective worship is a valued and important part of each school day. One pupil explained, 'Worship makes us think differently, if you're feeling down and gloomy it can make you happy knowing Jesus is there to help you'. Worship themes clearly reflect the Christian year and Bible teaching. Links between worship themes, Christian values and behaviour are apparent. Pupils readily share their understanding of values when talking about their work or behaviour. They give some examples of Bible stories that reflect Christian values. One pupil spoke of how the last supper made them think about forgiveness. 'Jesus breaking bread and offering wine is a sign for me, it tells me to be like Jesus and forgive others, it makes me feel good'. Jesus in the desert reminds another not to be tempted but to trust God and follow the right path. Worship and prayer give staff confidence to listen and support pupils and their families in challenging times.

Pupils show reverence and respect in daily worship. They interact very well when asked to participate and sing with great enthusiasm and joy. The Year 5 and 6 worship group ably assist in worship led by adults through reading prayers and assisting with activities. Older children take mature responsibility for many routine aspects of worship such as setting up the hall and operating technology. However, pupils do not yet plan and lead their own acts of worship. Although pupils experience some aspects of Anglican belief and practice, this is not fully embedded in daily worship. Pupil's awareness and understanding of the Trinity and liturgical colours are also at an early stage of development.

Pupils value prayer as being precious and important. Each class has a reflection area where they can choose to be quiet, reflect and pray. These were especially important when the academy recently supported pupils during a time of great sadness. Pupils spoke of how they felt supported by the vicar being in their prayer space to pray and talk with them. The academy lives out faith with pupils by readily responding to individual requests for prayer. A Year 6 pupil explained, 'God is your friend all the time, you can't see him but he is there so you know you are never ever alone.'

The subject leader regularly discusses and evaluates worship with small groups of pupils to help inform next steps for development. Parents are regularly invited to share worship in school and church and enjoy participating. Pupils, staff and parents spoke with great enthusiasm of a recent worship, led by a visitor from the diocese.

Experiencing a journey through Holy Week through its sounds had an excellent impact on spiritual development linked to the Gospel.

The effectiveness of the religious education is satisfactory

Pupils are actively involved in their learning. They enjoy RE and the different ways they learn, particularly art, poetry, discussion, church visits and role play. Teaching and learning make explicit links with the school's identified Christian values. A Key Stage 2 pupil explained that, 'Noah believed in God and trusted him so we should trust God too'. Standards are in line with those of core subjects but below national expectation. Although pupils make progress and are regularly given written feedback they are not always clear how to improve their work. The assessment focus from the previous inspection, to refine and develop the assessment system in RE has been addressed. Teachers assess pupil's work accurately against national expectations and individual attainment in each unit of work is recorded. However, assessment is not used sufficiently well to regularly track progress and inform teacher's planning. As a result, the needs of pupils of different abilities are not being met accurately enough to accelerate their progress in RE. Some activities are not sufficiently demanding.

The balance between pupils learning about religion and explaining what they learn from it is not yet consistent across the school. This means that not all pupils are regularly challenged to engage with deeper thinking and spirituality through enquiry and reflection. Some activities in class big books have expectations which are far too low and do not challenge pupils. However, higher expectations are demonstrated very well in the Year 1 book. A parallel is made between Jesus' life and that of a flower, 'Instead of dying, Jesus was like a seed because he rose again'. These young children also thought carefully about what it means to be a follower. In Year 6, children wrote thoughtfully and reflectively about what John the Baptist's message would be today. Their work clearly shows that they are challenged well to reflect on whether Easter is the beginning or the end.

The subject leader is enthusiastic about RE. She recognises the need to raise expectations and to develop consistency in standards and progress across the academy. She attends diocesan training and provides teachers with new information to develop approaches to teaching and learning. She has worked with the diocesan adviser to review pupil's work. The school improvement plan accurately identifies the monitoring of RE as an area for development.

Pupils know it is important to learn about other faiths so that they can respect them. They confidently name other faiths but their knowledge of them is limited. Pupils recently enjoyed a themed day focusing on how Christianity in different countries reflects other cultures. This impacted positively on their understanding of Christianity as a global world faith.

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

All leaders wholeheartedly promote a vision based on distinctively Christian values. Reviewing the academy's vision and mission was an area for development from the last inspection and involved the whole community.

Consequently, this vision and mission is shared and understood by all. The well-being of pupils is given high priority and the exceptional level of pastoral care is rooted in Christian love. The strong faith and commitment of the headteacher ensures everyone works effectively together.

The local governing committee has recently experienced a period of great change due to a high turnover of governors. This required the appointment of a new chairperson and vice-chairperson. A values committee is to engage new governors in the active self-evaluation and monitoring of the academy's Christian distinctiveness, including RE and worship. The headteacher and leadership team are clear about priorities for the academy and provide detailed reports and information for governors. As a result, governors are well informed about the academy's work. They know that the school is working to raise attainment and accelerate pupil progress.

Governors and the MAT are highly supportive of the school. They recognise that there are challenges for the school in improving outcomes and attendance for pupils. They regularly ask challenging questions of academy leadership. RE and worship are led with integrity and commitment to raising standards in RE and developing approaches to worship. They meet all statutory requirements.

The school has links with other local church schools and accesses professional development and support offered by the diocese. There are well established and beneficial links with the local church and clergy. Three parishes recently combined to become one. The priest in charge is the new incumbent and provides strong spiritual support for the academy. Pupils visit the church to take part in academy services and to support their learning in RE. They develop understanding of global issues through supporting the Bethany School in Tanzania. Pupils initiate fund raising for this and other charities such as the Poppy Mae Foundation, a child cancer charity. In this way they develop awareness of the importance of Christian giving and service both locally and globally.