Statutory Inspection of Anglican Schools Report

St Mary's Church of England Voluntary Aided High School
Churchgate, Waltham Cross EN8 9ED

Diocese of St Albans

LA:	**Hertfordshire**
SIAS Inspection:	**15 October 2009**
Previous S23 Inspection:	**8 and 9 March 2007**
URN:	**117595**
Headteacher:	**Ms Stephanie Benbow**
SIAS Inspector Name:	**Ms Jo Fageant**
SIAS Inspector No:	**104**

School Context

St Mary's High School is a smaller than average school with a maths and computing specialism. The intake is ethnically diverse and amendments to the admissions criteria in recent years have resulted in increasing numbers of students from families of faith and having experienced their primary years in church schools. The school is preparing to move to new buildings soon to be completed on a site a short distance away.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Mary's High School as a Church of England school are good.

The school is very clear and open with everyone about its Christian foundation. Despite there being no explicit identification of the Christian values which underpin the life of the school, there is a widely shared understanding of its Christian ethos which is all pervasive in its impact. This is valued by students, parents/carers, staff and governors.

Established strengths

- The positive attitudes of students to their school and its Christian foundation
- The proactive commitment of leaders to improvement through support of staff and students
- The welcome and sense of inclusion felt by all members of the school community
- The ways in which the school is explicit about its Christian foundation and is active in its promotion

Focus for development

- Ensure agreement and clarity about, and effective sharing of, the Christian values on which the life of the school is founded
- Develop strategies to ensure all students are motivated and enthusiastic to learn
- Clarify an understanding of the level descriptors for religious education amongst teachers of the subject

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

Learners and their parents/carers are enthusiastic about the school. They especially value the inclusive ethos which makes everyone feel welcome and ensures attention is given to the needs of each student. Many parents/carers value very highly the ways in which the school explicitly expresses its Christian foundation saying things like: 'it provides clear building blocks for child growth, physical and spiritual'; 'I believe it instils the values we are losing as a society'. Students too are positive about the Christian character of their school and the good relationships they believe this gives rise to which, in turn, enable difficulties to be sorted out effectively. Students have confidence in the Student Voice Programme as a means through which their views are heard and they are able to contribute to bringing about improvements. They have been actively involved in planning aspects of the new school including ways in which spirituality will be expressed there. Learners are also encouraged to involve themselves in community initiatives, for example through fundraising for causes chosen by year group councils. Many students throughout the school speak positively about their learning. Whilst acknowledging variety, they are grateful for the efforts teachers make to ensure lessons are engaging and enjoyable. Staff are never complacent and are always seeking ways in which the experiences of students can be improved and reluctant learners can become better motivated. For example, a great deal of effort has gone into a recent initiative to integrate personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE) and social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) across the curriculum. Both these arrangements are at a very early stage of implementation but effective monitoring processes are in place to enable evaluation which will inform future planning. A programme of circle time activities used with nominated students in Key Stage 3 has been almost exclusively well received by them and is perceived to have resulted in improved relationships within year groups. These and other planning strategies contribute to the good spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good.

Particularly good progress with collective worship, led by teachers, governors and clergy, has been made since the last inspection. Students now enjoy increased participation in planning and leading worship. They are very pleased that their criticisms of former worship arrangements have been heard and acted upon, some saying, 'we listen now!'. They identify shorter acts of worship focusing on more relevant themes presented in more engaging ways as very positive improvements. Some go as far as to say that acts of worship are now very thought provoking and provide participants with ideas and values to take out into their lives in and beyond school. An indication of the value derived from school worship experiences was seen when St Mary's students requested a special service on the occasion of the death of a student from another local school. Music, diverse and contemporary, enriches the quality of worship. All members of the school community, including staff and students of other faiths, develop a familiarity with Anglican traditions and practice through regular worship in church including eucharist services. Large numbers of students either take communion or seek a blessing but others appreciate the freedom to abstain from either. Provision is made for a Roman Catholic mass each half term. In amongst this picture of positive improvement, it is not clear whether the voices of less enthusiastic students more reluctant to speak out have been heard.

The effectiveness of religious education is good.

Staff changes since the last inspection have resulted in a team which comprises experienced, enthusiastic, and specialist teachers. However, departmental systems of management, planning, tracking and analysis of students' progress are newly in place. Early as it is to make a judgement, the success of these developments is clear from the enthusiasm with which students speak of their religious education (RE) lessons. Older students in particular are clear that their experiences of the subject have significantly improved. They recognise the efforts made by their teachers to ensure lessons are stimulating. They appreciate having lesson objectives shared with them and marking which indicates how well they have done, why this is so and how they can improve their work. All students in Key Stage 4 follow a GCSE course and many speak of the high quality of support given to them and the revision sessions available. There is a trend of improving results and an opportunity to study religious studies at A level, a course shared between St Mary's and another school. Teachers of RE are very clear about actions to be taken to continue improvements. The timetabled programme of teachers observing one another's lessons and the moderation of marking are initiatives which are certain to be beneficial. This is particularly true because it is not clear that all members of the department have a shared understanding of the level descriptors which define attainment in RE.

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

The clear structures, well defined areas of responsibility and strategies in place to enable a range of leaders to discharge their responsibilities effectively are strengths of St Mary's High School. The group of teachers and governors with responsibility for evaluating and developing the distinctiveness and effectiveness of the school as a church school is enthusiastic, energetic and committed to its role. It values close links with and support from a member of the diocesan team. Members of this group have ensured progress made in relation to issues raised in the last inspection report has been at least satisfactory. Significant improvements in collective worship and RE are testament to their efforts. More people are now involved in evaluating the school as a church school and there is understanding of how this can be further improved. The Christian foundation and ethos are evident in all aspects of the life of the school, in interviews and induction with new staff, at governors meetings and meetings with parents/carers. Partnerships between St Mary's and the church, church primary schools and the local community are positive and result in a wide range of well received initiatives and events. Leaders are always keen to seek new ways in which the school, the lives of its staff and students, along with its contribution to the wider community can be enriched in ways in keeping with their 'Christian values'. Whilst many people speak confidently and positively of these Christian values and their impact, this arises from a general assumption that everyone shares the same understanding.