

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

Howbridge Church of England Voluntary Controlled Junior School	
Howbridge Road, Witham, Essex, CM8 1BZ	
Current SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Diocese	Chelmsford
Previous SIAMS inspection grade	Outstanding
Date of academy conversion	September 2014
Name of multi-academy trust	The Vine Trust
Date/s of inspection	9 December 2016
Date of last inspection	7 May 2010
Type of school and unique reference number	VC Primary 115104
Headteacher	Sean Wade
Inspector's name and number	Graham Lancaster 713

School context

Howbridge Junior is a larger than average school with 354 pupils on roll. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils is slightly above the national average. The percentage of those with special educational needs or disabilities and those who speak English as an additional language is below the national average. The headteacher and the majority of teachers were not in place at the time of the previous denominational inspection. The school has not had an OFSTED inspection since its conversion to a sponsored academy within the Chelmsford Diocese multi academy trust (MAT).

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of Howbridge Junior as a Church of England school are good

- Strong leadership has led to significant improvements in the overall effectiveness of the school and to strengthening its Christian distinctiveness.
- Christian values are now deeply embedded in the school's ethos and have a clear impact on pupils' lives, including on their relationships in and out of school and their understanding and appreciation of the world around them.

Areas to improve

- Deepen pupils' experience of spirituality through developing their understanding of the impact of religious beliefs and enhancing stimuli within areas set aside for reflection and prayer.
- Increase pupils' contribution to the leadership and evaluation of collective worship in order to further extend engagement and enhance practice.

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

The distinctive Christian character of Howbridge Junior is not only evident in the physical environment of the school but also in the ways in which it affects the whole community. Staff, pupils and parents testify to the positive impact that Christian values have on relationships, behaviour and the clear commitment to every pupil achieving success. Pupils are able to explain how the school's vision statement interfaces with the four headings, strive, trust, achieve and respect, under which gospel values are grouped. These provide a framework for 'STAR' awards which are much sought after by pupils. Pupils say that the values help them to make the right choices. One parent described how her son was thrilled to recently receive an award for 'being a loving and funny friend' when another pupil, 'needed it most'. Pupil behaviour is excellent, founded on effective positive behaviour management strategies and immediate support from senior staff as and when required. This clearly expresses the school's Christian values in the day to day encounters between members of the school community.

There is an explicit commitment to the development and progress of every pupil, including those that are vulnerable, which stems from the Christian values of the school. Effective action is leading to rising standards so that achievement is now comparable to national averages. Challenging targets have been set for all year groups and pupil progress against these is closely monitored by class teachers and school leaders. Close analysis of pupil outcomes in 2016 has taken place and the areas of relative vulnerability are clearly being successfully addressed in action planning. Evidence in pupil workbooks indicates that more able pupils are being appropriately challenged and school data suggests that the gap between boys and girls is being narrowed. One parent described the additional support her child has received and the responsiveness of the school's special needs co-ordinator as 'amazing'. The school continues to employ strategies which have been highly effective in closing the gap between the achievement of vulnerable pupils and their peers. In keeping with the school's Christian and inclusive ethos attendance has improved and is now in line with the national average. The school has links with a school in Rwanda and an orphanage in Kenya. Both contribute to pupils' understanding of Christianity as a multi-cultural world faith. Pupils understand the importance of charitable giving but they have limited influence over which charities are supported. The school has deliberately incorporated pupils' work in RE into cross-curricular books. This is successful in ensuring that expectations are equally high in all subjects. However, the focus of learning and assessment is often on the quality of written English rather than depth of understanding in RE. Pupils show great capacity for consideration of challenging questions. At present insufficient opportunities are provided for pupils to learn from or explore their personal response to religious, spiritual and moral issues. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development is given a high priority and is planned for effectively. Prayer takes place both within collective worship and at other times in the school day and supports pupils' spiritual development well. Some pupils visit the quiet reflection area in the library. One described how she had written a prayer there asking God for encouragement to work towards achieving a 'STAR' award. However, the area contains little by way of stimulation for the development of pupils' spirituality. The school has prepared an area for the development of an outdoor space for reflection and prayer but this is at an early stage of development.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good

The co-ordination of collective worship is highly effective. School leaders and local clergy are involved in planning from the outset, weaving together leadership from within the school team and from a range of visitors. Worship makes a significant impact on pupils' lives through the exploration of a different gospel value in depth each half term. Parents are sent ideas for related follow up activities at home. There is weekly worship specifically focussed on a Bible passage. Each class also has one afternoon session devoted to a related Bible story and another set aside for reflection on the worship theme. Through this biblical focus pupils have a good understanding of the importance of the Bible for Christians, relating aspects of story and beliefs to their own lives. The collective worship leader supports colleagues well in the planning and delivery of these sessions.

Worship is distinctively Christian. An attractive focal point includes a candle which pupils recognise as representing the light of Christ. Pupils are helped to track the seasons of the church year through a prominent display. They have a growing understanding of the Christian belief in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Some opportunities are provided for pupils to lead worship, including the pupil council, the house captains and the peer mentors. However, there is no systematic process for identifying and developing leadership potential in particular pupils. Pupils write and read their own prayers as part of worship. One pupil commented, 'it's a chance to explore the presence of God. Mind you, when you really need him he is always there'.

Pupil response to worship is captured in collective worship books each term. These demonstrate the impact of worship in comments such as 'sometimes we can be like a balloon, too full of our own importance. We need to be humble with our achievements'. The school has responded to a request by the pupil council for pupils to have more opportunities for active involvement in worship through drama and to include more stories which they can relate directly to their own lives. However, no pupils have received support to develop the evaluative skills required to contribute in depth to the further development of worship. There is also limited monitoring and evaluation of worship by governors.

Services in the parish church for major Christian festivals are increasingly well supported by parents. Their feedback is captured in writing and this is universally positive, providing encouragement for school leaders as they seek to develop worship further.

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

Following a period of significant challenge and considerable changes for the school the headteacher has built an effective staff team who share his clear vision and aspirations for the school. He, his deputy and the governors have ensured that the school's distinctive Christian character has remained a priority and impacted positively on securing improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. This has led to significant progress and improved standards, a view endorsed by external agencies. Pupil progress is closely tracked and the school has employed successful strategies to support pupils who are at risk of underachieving. Leadership is very effectively distributed through five core teams to address priorities for improvement. This provides practical opportunities for future church school leaders to grow, with support and coaching from senior staff. One team has explicit responsibility for Christian distinctiveness, RE and collective worship. Leaders have capitalised on training and advice provided by the Diocese. The deputy headteacher is very effective in the co-ordination and development of collective worship and also provides coaching for the recently appointed leader of RE. All staff work very well as a team and their relationships exemplify the Christian ethos of the school well.

Action has been taken to address areas for development from the previous denominational inspection, though efforts to secure a partnership with a school in a different context have been thwarted thus far. Although self-evaluation is detailed, there is insufficient correlation between the areas for development identified and the school's improvement plan. Governors know their school very well and provide both support and challenge as appropriate. Governors monitor progress and improvements against agreed priorities. However, they have correctly identified the need to introduce a systematic and rigorous approach to their monitoring and evaluation of RE and collective worship. The school provides a valued link between the church and the local community and successfully promotes special events in the church's calendar including fortnightly Sunday services held in the school. Clergy add to the leadership capacity of the school, particularly in collective worship and RE. Leaders recognise the contribution a strong partnership with parents makes to both pupils' learning and to forming community founded on Christian values. They have employed successful strategies to encourage parents to attend a range of events from formal curriculum meetings to occasions such as Macmillan fund raising events. One parent described the partnership between home and school as 'the best it has been in my thirteen years as a parent of the school'.

SIAMS report (December 2016) Howbridge VC Junior School, Witham, Essex, CM8 1BZ