



INSPECTION REPORT OF DENOMINATIONAL CHARACTER AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

(Under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005)

ST THOMAS MORE VOLUNTARY AIDED CATHOLIC TEACHING SCHOOL

Tyne Crescent, Bedford, MK41 7UL

DfE School No: 822/4605

URN: 139517

Head Teacher: Ms A Wilshaw
Executive Principal: Mr T Bishop
Chair of Governors: Mr C Donnellan

Reporting Inspector: Mrs K Edwards

Date of Inspection: 14 March 2017

Date Report Issued: 29 March 2017

Date of previous Inspection: March 2011

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

Information about the school

St Thomas More School is a 11-18 co-educational school in the diocese of Northampton. The school became an Academy in 2013 and is part of the St Francis of Assisi Academy Trust. There are 67 members of teaching staff, 32 of whom are Catholic. There are 926 pupils on role, approximately 53% of whom are Catholic with the remainder of the pupil body coming from a diverse range of Christian and other faith backgrounds. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is approximately 24%. More than 50% of pupils come from an ethnic minority background including White other (mostly Italian and Polish pupils), African, Indian and White and Black Caribbean. The school has 8 pupils currently registered as looked after, and 29 pupils who are subject to Educational Healthcare Plans.

Key grades for inspection

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

Overall effectiveness

Grade 1

St Thomas More is an outstanding Catholic school with inspirational leadership and excellent provision for chaplaincy, prayer and collective worship. The executive principal and the governors provide strong support to the head teacher and there is a strongly shared vision for creating an inclusive Catholic community where all are welcome and diversity is celebrated. Religious Education, spiritual and moral development, prayer and worship are of prime importance in the school. The Catholic ethos is evidenced further by the quality of relationships between staff and pupils. Pupils describe their school as a place where 'we can learn about ourselves and others', and they appreciate the opportunities given by staff to develop their knowledge, understanding and practice of the Catholic faith. Due to the outstanding leadership of all staff in the school and the dedication, commitment and skill of the chaplain and head of Religious Education, outcomes for pupils are excellent.

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

Grade 1

The school provides outstanding Catholic education and has developed capacity further since its last inspection. The development of chaplaincy provision within and alongside RE teaching has enriched the curriculum at KS3 and KS4. Most year groups now have access to experiences of retreat, for example the Year 9 Emmaus Walk or Year 7 Pentecost Liturgy at a local parish, as the school constantly looks for creative ways to provide space for prayer, reflection and spiritual development. The school takes a leading role in the wider community through the Academy Trust and its status as a Teaching School in sharing outstanding practice and in training Catholic leaders for the future. The teaching methodology in RE is vibrant and creative and the head of department's expertise is shared with other schools. The school has responded well to current issues of staffing in Religious Education by using the expertise already in the school and nurturing a newly qualified teacher and a trainee.

The quality of self-evaluation is rigorous and the impact of provision is well evidenced through the collection of quantitative and qualitative data. Governors, senior staff and middle leaders have a very good grasp of the school's strengths and areas for development. The Inspector agreed with the judgements made by the school on the SEF RE.

The head teacher, leadership team, governors and trust director work strategically to make their shared vision for Catholic education a reality in the school. The result is an inclusive faith community where all are made to feel welcome and the Catholic ethos of the school is not compromised.

What the school should do to improve further

- Review and develop the KS3 curriculum to ensure pupils are prepared for the increased academic rigour of the new GCSE, whilst maintaining its current richness for spiritual development.
- Review and develop as planned the provision for RE at post-16 for all students.

Outcomes for pupils

Grade 1

Pupils talk enthusiastically about the Catholic ethos of the school and how the school's inclusive approach to prayer, worship and Religious Education builds their sense of belonging and community. They feel that their opinions are valued and that the school is a safe place to learn about themselves and others. They appreciate the many opportunities to practise and develop their faith and to engage in the wide variety of charitable work at school and in the wider community. They are confident and articulate in discussing matters of faith and belief.

Pupils value the opportunities they are given to lead prayer and worship in the school. The post-16 faith ambassadors provide excellent role models for younger pupils as they lead liturgies in the school and support in RE lessons. Pupils respond to prayer and worship with respect and reverence, irrespective of their faith background. They enjoy collective acts of worship and value the open door policy and diverse resources offered by the prayer room. It is notable that the prayer room is not exclusively Christian but is open for all believers to pray, in particular Muslim pupils use the prayer room at lunchtimes.

There is a good attendance at the weekly, voluntary Mass by pupils and they value all the opportunities given to mark the Church's liturgical year within year groups and across the school. There is a strong sense given by pupils that prayer is central to everything the school does and is inclusive of everyone.

Chaplaincy provision has a powerful impact in the school as pupils benefit from the rich and creative approaches offered for prayer and reflection. They also value the pastoral support and affirmation offered by the school chaplain and their teachers as they explore their faith and develop as young people.

Pupils make outstanding progress in Religious Education and overall achievement, including that of vulnerable pupils, remains high and well above national expectation. Pupils enjoy their lessons because they are given opportunities to consider and develop their opinions. They benefit from the encouragement to raise their own curious questions and engage in debate about opinions different from their own. They are given valuable insight and understanding of the Church's teaching and engage well with this context as they explore issues that matter to them as young people. Pupils take a pride in their work and value the marking and feedback given by their teachers which helps them to improve and develop. Behaviour for learning is of a high standard as pupils are attentive to teachers and to each other, yet display curious and enquiring minds. They respond well to the expectation that they are active, independent learners and they show impressive skill at learning collaboratively. Pupils enjoy Religious Education lessons and view the subject as important, especially the opportunity to learn about other faiths. The number of pupils who go on to take the subject as A Level is impressive.

Leaders and managers

Grade 1

The trust director and governors are clear that Catholic ethos underpins all that they do and they share a common vocation to support and develop Catholic education at St Thomas More and in the wider school community. There is regular and robust examination of the school's provision for RE, chaplaincy and Catholic ethos and strategic involvement in the whole school planning, monitoring and evaluation cycles and processes. The head teacher and SLT provide inspirational leadership, support and challenge to all staff in developing the Catholic life of the school. Senior leaders ensure that there is a strong commitment from all to develop SMSC across the curriculum and see prayer

and worship as integral to the life of the school. They are passionate about their role in ensuring that the school provides an inclusive environment in which all feel valued and welcome, and that staff, parents and pupils from different faiths enrich the Catholic nature of the school. Training opportunities are well used to support staff in reaching and maintaining these high expectations.

The head of RE and the chaplain are well supported by senior leaders. Regular meetings are held between the SLT line manager for RE and the head of department to monitor the work of the department and offer any support necessary. The previous line manager, now the deputy head teacher, offers outstanding support and teaching experience to the whole team. A departmental tracking system monitors and reviews pupil progress and the scrutiny of this data shapes strategies for improvements in the quality of teaching. Quality assurance is carried out through book scrutinies and learning walks. Schemes of work are regularly reviewed and updated as practice is developed. Examination results are analysed rigorously so that interventions can be planned and implemented to ensure future achievement. The RE department reports formally to the governing body on an annual basis.

Provision

Grade 1

Prayer and collective worship are central to the life of the school. Chaplaincy provision is outstanding because of its dynamism, creativity and impact. The school chaplain responds sensitively to the diverse needs of the community, understanding the differing types of support that pupils and staff need to develop and express their faith. She is inspirational in her ability to meet members of the community 'where they are' and in her commitment to find new and different ways to develop prayer and worship. The community is offered a wide range of liturgy and there are many opportunities given for all staff and pupils to participate in and lead collective worship. The prayer room provides a vibrant focus and resource but the evidence that the school is a prayerful, worshipping community extends beyond this across the school site. The 'Ethos' parental questionnaire evidences the very high regard parents have for the school's provision regarding RE and Catholicity.

The quality of teaching in RE is outstanding due to a highly effective house-style which is consistent across the department. Teachers plan creatively so that active learning is a key feature of all lessons. Pupils are given opportunity to take responsibility for their learning. Challenging questioning by teachers enables pupils to think in academically rigorous ways from Year 7 to Year 13. Space is created for pupils to pose and answer their own questions. Differentiated resources and various methods of scaffolding ensure that the most able are challenged with support being given to those who need it. Assessment is regular and robust and teachers give specific feedback to pupils as part of a consistent marking policy. This enables pupils to know what they need to do to improve. There is a necessary focus on how the skills, knowledge and understanding in lessons links to specific exam questions and requirements however, this is not allowed to stifle creativity and enjoyment of learning. Outstanding relationships between teachers and pupils ensure that there is safe space for pupils to learn and grow as RE students but also in faith development.

The schemes of work in RE are well planned and address the learning objectives of ICONS, GCSE and A Level courses and the Curriculum Directory. Curriculum materials have been developed to incorporate Spiritual Development, Theology, World Religious Celebrations, Philosophy and Ecclesial Theology. At GCSE Year 10 follow a Social Issues course and Year 11 the Religion and Society course. These courses ensure that Sex and Relationships Education is given an effective foundation in faith before aspects of the PSE curriculum are taught. Year 11 are given the opportunity to study a lived example of Islam to learn about the majority religious groups other than Catholics in the school. At A Level the New Testament and Ethics course has proved extremely popular and offers great opportunity for personal and spiritual development. There is good reason to expect that school will continue to offer these valuable opportunities as it comes to grips with the demands of new GCSE and A Level courses.

The inspector would like to thank all members of the school community for the warm welcome and hospitality extended during her visit.