

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

Thomas Whitehead Church of England Primary Academy

Vision

“Let your light shine” (Matthew 5:16)

Our vision is to ensure that everything we do is underpinned by our core values of Hope, Perseverance and Respect. Through our Christian values we aim to provide an aspirational and inclusive learning environment, in which every child can let their light shine and flourish. “A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” Matthew 5:14

Thomas Whitehead Academy is living up to its foundation as a Church school and is enabling pupils and adults to flourish. It has the following notable strengths.

Strengths

- A Christian vision, rooted in the words of Jesus and in his example, enables pupils and adults to thrive. Pupils lead the way proudly on ‘letting their light shine’. Their school leaders’ decisions and actions are inspired by a desire that each person’s light shines as brightly as it can. This results in a culture that is aspirational and respectful, leading to mutual flourishing.
- Collective worship is a time for a calm and reverent gathering of the whole school community. It supports pupils and staff as they seek to share their light with others. It is very well supported by the local church, both spiritually and also in practical ways.
- The depth of relationships at all levels is a key part of ‘letting your light shine’ and living out the school’s values. All stakeholders speak of trusting each other which builds mutual care, nurture and support. It binds the school team together and sustains them day by day, through the good times and the challenges. This trust extends to other fruitful partnerships, in particular the relationship with the Diocese of St Albans Multi-Academy Trust (DSAMAT).
- The religious education (RE) curriculum has been developed to serve its context very well. Staff are confident in their teaching and pupils are very engaged in their learning. By exploring big questions about religion and human life, pupils are able to articulate their thinking and express their ideas clearly.

Development Points

- Embed opportunities for deeper thinking about challenging injustice across the whole curriculum. This is to help pupils to take ownership of their actions to make their school and the world a better place.
- Extend pupils’ knowledge and understanding of non-religious worldviews. This is so that pupils explore fully their own beliefs and ideas and those of others, as they prepare for their future lives.



Inspection Findings

The Christian vision for Thomas Whitehead primary academy was chosen by the pupils and then further shaped by everyone else involved in the school. This means that, above all, it is an accessible and inclusive vision which excites the pupils. They talk about how they will let their light shine, knowing that this means using the school values when they are able. An understanding of light in the darkness and of Jesus as the light of the world underpins the Christian vision. The use of 'letting your light shine' is thoroughly embedded in the daily life of the school. It naturally informs conversations about learning, behaviour and attitudes. There is an added sense that bright light points in the direction of high aspiration. The governors use the vision to monitor and evaluate the way in which the school operates on a day-to-day basis. It informs their visits, their discussion and their decisions. DSAMAT has supported the school in finding the right vision for its context. 'Let your light shine' flows clearly from the trust's own vision of fullness of life.

By reviewing the whole curriculum, school leaders are ensuring that teaching and learning meet the needs of those who choose the school. The idea that each person's light should shine provides an aspirational model for learning. It is a light which shines within and for oneself but also for the benefit of others. The building of a new curriculum has included careful consideration of a shared understanding of spiritual development, through training from the diocese. An approach based on the images of windows, mirrors and doors is starting to take root. This is evident within collective worship, RE and, more gradually, within the wider curriculum. Pupils are able to ask 'big' questions, which encourage philosophical thinking, by looking out at the world. They know how to take time to reflect on what they have observed. In turn, they are beginning to have their own ideas about how they can respond. The centrality of calm, quiet, safe space for personal reflection is very significant in meeting the specific needs of particular pupils. This helps them to feel ready to access the curriculum and to learn well.

There is a sense of excitement when pupils talk about RE. They want to share what they know, especially the 'fascinating' things that they had not known before. Recent training, which encouraged creative approaches, has enthused staff and this feeds through to pupils. Teachers describe themselves as 'more confident' with the revised curriculum, which they see as being more balanced and inclusive than previously. This is the result of the work of those who lead RE, working closely with DSAMAT. By integrating spiritual reflection with a re-worked curriculum, there is a growing depth to teaching and learning. It means that pupils have more discussions in which 'we maintain our own opinions and talk about why we think that'.

The impact of staff training and the new curriculum comes through as pupils share their recorded work which is presented imaginatively. Each term, classes explore 'big' questions by thinking about what they already know. Having consolidated their learning for a number of weeks, they can then reflect on this and answer the big question better as a result. This is an effective way of demonstrating progress in their learning each term. There is a growing understanding of why RE learning is important and how it will help pupils in the future. This includes an acceptance and tolerance for those of all faiths and of none. The impact of learning about a range of non-religious worldviews is not yet apparent.

The collective worship programme is carefully planned to give staff and pupils a time to find space in the busyness of the day. It also reiterates the joy of letting your light shine as brightly as it possibly can. There is a sense of calm expectation as the community gathers and settles. There is a clear message based on the vision or values which pupils are able to apply to their own lives. A focus on 'I wonder' questions offers staff and pupils the opportunity to



reflect on their own faith or point of view. They do this respectfully and thoughtfully. Implementing collective worship in this way supports spiritual flourishing well. All staff lead worship and enjoy contributing in this way. Pupils appreciate the times when they can input their reflections, poems and prayers to enrich worship. DSAMAT points other schools to Thomas Whitehead academy as a model of good practice. The close partnership with the local church is demonstrated through joint planning and a weekly worship time in the church. In addition, there is Mass for Key Stage 2 pupils and the marking of Christian festivals. A range of people describe how 'we know and trust the church', feeling welcome whether they have a faith or do not. The deep relationship with the church is both a practical and a pastoral one. The priest summed it up as, 'I am here if they need me', referring to the whole school community.

Within school, there is strong sense of responsibility. This flows out of the desire to shine and to live out the values in practical and loving ways. Pupils understand that have responsibility for themselves but know that this includes a responsibility towards others. This means that they are eager to support each other in their learning as well as in social times. They describe how this extends to those who do not have enough to eat or who might be lonely or sad in the wider world. This is lived out in their support for charities, including the local foodbank and Macmillan. Some pupils are able to link this to a wider sense of justice by talking about people who have stood up for an important cause. However, they do not express a clear sense of how tackling injustice helps people to make important changes in the world.

Around and above the school's current journey of improvement sit relationships based on deep trust. They are the bedrock of the support given freely and generously to pupils, their families and staff. The school has built a reputation for nurturing pupils with additional needs. The culture of inclusion is totally embedded in the school. Staff are well trained and give 'whatever it takes' to understand and support pupils. In their day-to-day interactions, pupils live well and compassionately with each other. Throughout what are described as 'turbulent times' in recent years, the staff team say they feel 'more supported than they have ever done'. DSAMAT has played an important role in staff flourishing by providing external support, both personally and professionally. Many other partnerships enable the most vulnerable to access what they need, thus being both rich and fruitful. Parents and carers describe relationships with the school in terms of 'feeling safe'. A sense of true belonging comes from families being a part of the church and the community through the school. Primarily, however, it is the fact that the school makes their children 'kind and courageous, shining a light' which is important for them.

Information

Address	Angels Lane, Houghton Regis, Dunstable, Bedfordshire LU5 5HH		
Date	14 November 2024	URN	143850
Type of school	Academy	No. of pupils	192
Diocese	St Albans		
MAT	Diocese of St Albans Multi-Academy Trust (DSAMAT)		
Headteacher	Natasha Chiswell		
Chair of Governors	Paul Foster		
Inspector	Virginia Corbyn		