

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

Debenham High School – A Church of England Academy	
Gracechurch Street, Debenham, Suffolk IP14 6BL	
Current SIAMS inspection grade	Outstanding
Diocese	St Edmundsbury & Ipswich
Previous SIAS inspection grade	Outstanding
Date of academy conversion	January 2011
Date of inspection	10 October 2017
Date of last inspection	11 December 2012
Type of school and unique reference number	11-16 Academy 136416
Headteacher	Julia Upton
Inspector's name and number	Gill Hipwell 480

School context

The catchment area of this rural high school incorporates a small market town and several outlying villages. It is relatively small in relation to the county average and consistently over-subscribed, with around one third of its 677 pupils coming from outside the catchment area. Although average attainment on entry exceeds national percentages, some pupils face significant challenges. The school is growing and is in the process of extending its buildings. Academic progress and outcomes for all groups have been significantly above local and national averages for a number of years. Leadership is exceptionally stable; the current headteacher has been in post for five years and is only the fourth since the school's foundation in 1964. After a lengthy interregnum there is a new incumbent in the parish. In 2016 the school was instrumental in setting up the Mid Suffolk Teaching Schools Alliance (MSTSA), in which the diocese is also a partner. The current director of the teaching school is an assistant headteacher at Debenham.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of Debenham as a Church of England school are outstanding

- The depth of the Christian ethos and the extent to which every interaction focuses on the intrinsic worth of each individual lead to outstanding progress and personal development for pupils and adults.
- The stable and committed staff team gives a high priority to personalised learning and pastoral support, both in and out of the classroom. Pupils are known and loved, and as a result they respect and trust their teachers.
- Strong and established partnerships with the diocese and local churches ensure that there is consistent, high quality Christian support for collective worship, religious education and school development.
- Strong leadership, which combines high expectations with compassion, ensures that Christian principles are at the heart of policy and practice.

Areas to improve

- Monitor opportunities for personal reflection in acts of collective worship so that pupils and adults are consistently supported to develop their own approaches to prayer and quiet thought. Ensure that both this and the outcomes of all monitoring are evaluated and reported back to governors' meetings, in order to feed into strategic planning.
- Ensure that there is clarity in leaders' articulation of their shared Christian vision for the school, so that this becomes an intrinsic part of conversations concerning the future direction of the school and its role in supporting others.

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

Christian values are deeply embedded in the life of the school. All members of the community live out their motto to 'treat others as you would want to be treated' and there is a shared understanding that this is one of Jesus's great commandments.

All staff model warm, loving and respectful relationships and this creates an environment firmly rooted in trust which enables pupils to succeed. Academic progress and outcomes are very good for all groups, including the disadvantaged who benefit from an exceptional level of personalised intervention. Progress is tracked and any issues are identified and dealt with quickly. Success is celebrated, with examples of pupils' work adorning shared spaces; achievement is universally respected.

Support of all kinds is welcomed by pupils, who talk openly of appreciating the help they are given by adults and fellow pupils. They speak passionately, for example, about the impact of drop-in sessions for young carers and the exceptional support offered to those in foster care. Peer mentoring programmes are effective and pupils are articulate about the benefits for both mentors and mentees. Roles are undertaken responsibly, showing maturity, commitment and an understanding of the Christian value of service.

A breadth of extra-curricular activities helps to develop pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC); there is a gentle sense of expectation that everyone will participate in something and, as they do, very special relationships are developed. Recent restructuring of the personal, social and health education (PSHE) programme has emphasised its links with RE and these two subjects play a major role in pupils' SMSC development. Pupils value PSHE and say they prefer the new system, where it is delivered by members of staff who know them well.

Religious education (RE) has an impact on pupils' understanding of the role of faith in different communities, including school. It provides opportunities to express views and opinions in a safe and respectful forum. Pupils say, 'We can disagree nicely'. Christianity is covered well, with key concepts being explored in depth; this enables pupils to look at their school community in the context of a world-wide Christian family. Pupils and adults are open about their faith and beliefs and this has promoted the sharing of important questions and confidence in debating the answers.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good

Daily morning worship sets the tone for the school day. Pupils experience it in a variety of forms, partly dictated by the constraints of the building.

Worship for gathered groups in the school hall is well-planned, biblically based and delivered by a range of leaders who command the respect of pupils and hold their attention. Pupils do not often have opportunities to lead these larger acts of worship. The inspector's observations confirmed the view of pupils that worship manages to be both informal and respectful. Clear and well-structured messages, combined with opportunities to share thoughts, pray and reflect, provide pupils with space to engage with the teachings of Jesus. Pupils say that they value these acts of worship, and also the festival services in the church which they describe as 'special' and 'spiritual'. Conversations with pupils and staff suggest that some individuals find gathered worship transformational and that all pupils make connections between worship and the Christian values of the school.

Pupils' experiences of worship in smaller groups are inconsistent. There are regular opportunities to share responses to events in the news, with an emphasis on values such as justice, compassion and reconciliation. However, specific provision for personal reflection is not consistent across these smaller groups and experiences of shared and personal prayer are limited for some pupils. Many pupils mentioned the spiritual impact of the annual prayer space event, coordinated by a local church youth leader who is a regular visitor to school. They say that they particularly appreciate the space to be still amidst the busyness of school and would value a permanent area set aside for quiet reflection.

Pupils can explain the nature of God as three in one in an age-appropriate manner, although, when questioned, they did not readily recognise the term 'Trinity'.

Foundation governors regularly attend worship, both in the school hall and in church, reporting informally on these visits. Procedures are not in place for the monitoring of worship in smaller groups.

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

Inspirational leadership from a passionate Christian headteacher who believes in empowering others has enabled the staff team in this school to flourish. Their commitment to the personal and academic development of every single pupil, regardless of their starting point, is rooted in the clearly stated Christian values of the school. There is a deep corporate belief both in the worth of the individual and the strength of the community. The motto 'treat others as you would want to be treated' is an unshakeable foundation that instils the confidence to reach for the stars.

Leaders and managers speak passionately of their Christian vision for the school. Whilst there is a sense of common understanding and purpose, the vision is not clearly articulated. This means that it is not easily referenced when policies are considered.

Christian values are deeply embedded and inform both strategic planning and the day-to-day interactions within the school. Well-being has a high priority; leaders are proactive in ensuring that appropriate support is in place for pupils and adults. Pastoral care has a very high profile and is hugely appreciated by pupils who know there is always someone there to help. The new incumbent has already begun to explore her chaplaincy role.

Partnerships with local churches, the diocese and other church schools underline the commitment of leaders and managers to maintaining the Christian ethos of the school. There are opportunities to share good practice and to support each-others' work, providing benefit to all parties. Local Christian leaders play a key role in school, contributing to RE, worship and wellbeing whilst modelling Christian service. The diocese worked with the school to ensure continued clergy input during the interregnum.

RE has a high profile within the school and governors ensure that it is well-resourced. Teachers are experienced and confident, leading to excellent GCSE results. There is an emphasis on discussion and debate which supports pupils' spiritual development. Importance is attached to networking and liaison with other schools, therefore there is support for the head of RE to be active within the diocese. The excellence of RE provision has been recognised by a gold RE Quality Mark.

Governors provide support and challenge for the headteacher and her team. They make regular visits and have a good knowledge of the school, including the strength of its Christian ethos. They do not, however, always ensure that the results of their monitoring are recorded and discussed. Governors are mindful of the need to consider ongoing growth and development without compromising the quality of education provided for pupils in their care. They have supported the creation of the teaching school, enabling staff to improve their own practice as well as supporting others, and continue to discuss future collaborations, always ensuring that the Christian character of the school is secure.

Parents value the Christian foundation of the school and speak of the confidence that this instils in their children. One Muslim parent says her family chose the school specifically because of the way 'God is honoured'.