

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

Witheridge Church of England Academy

Address	Fore Street, Witheridge, Tiverton, Devon, EX16 8AH		
Date of inspection	07/05/2019	Status of school	Academy inspected as VC, TEAM Multi Academy Trust
Diocese	Exeter	URN	113384

Overall Judgement	How effective is the school's distinctive Christian vision, established and promoted by leadership at all levels, in enabling pupils and adults to flourish?	Grade	Good
Additional Judgements	The impact of collective worship	Grade	Good

School context

Witheridge Academy is a primary school with 74 pupils on roll. The majority of pupils are of White British heritage. Very few pupils speak English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils who are considered to be disadvantaged is above national averages. The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) is also above national averages. The school became an academy as a member of the TEAM Multi Academy Trust (MAT) in July 2017, following a short time as part of the Taw Valley Federation. All but one of the teaching staff, including the headteacher, have been appointed since June 2017. The previously committee-led pre-school joined TEAM in Spring 2018.

The school's Christian vision

'Encourage One Another and Build Each Other Up' (1 Thessalonians 5: 11)
'... we aspire to encourage one another and build each other up to be the best that we can be: the best learners, the best friends, the best people, in school and in the wider community, now and in the future.'

Key findings

- The whole school family, including the parents, carers and the church, has been involved in the establishment of the vision and the Christian values that underpin it. Their understanding of the Biblical basis for them is a significant element in the successes now being achieved.
- The collective Christian vision is a potent driving force behind the rapid and sustained progress of the last two years. The encouraging and building up of one another has transformed the school and it is a beacon of hope for the whole community.
- All are warmly welcomed, and are highly valued as children of God. The vulnerable are cared for, the weak strengthened, and those with SEND have their needs met. The teamwork involved is exemplary.
- Religious education (RE) is bold and innovative, and the coordinator is enthusiastic and passionate about her work in leading this vital area of the curriculum. This leads to impressive levels of spiritual understanding.
- Collective worship is the heartbeat of the school, with excellent teaching, encouragement, spiritual guidance and prayerful reflection inspiring all to be the best that they can be. However, there is as yet no leadership of worship by pupils.
- Spiritual development is yet to be systematically and consistently built in to the whole curriculum.

Areas for development

- Strengthen and extend the excellent teaching in RE and worship across the curriculum, particularly on issues of faith, awe and wonder, so as to deepen still further the pupils' spiritual understanding.
- Develop pupils' involvement in planning, leading and evaluating worship to inspire others and themselves and to improve worship for all.

**How effective is the school's distinctive Christian vision, established and promoted by leadership at all levels, in enabling pupils and adults to flourish?
Inspection findings**

Wetheridge academy is a shining example of a school family that has come together with a Christian vision and transformed itself. The headteacher is visionary and inspirational, and leads by example. The revised leadership structure of the school arising from membership of the TEAM group of academies has great strength and flexibility. The executive head of the MAT is involved one day a week. She provides expertise and advice, is respected and warmly appreciated, and thus her impact on the overall well-being of the whole school family is significant. The headteacher and the coordinator for RE and worship share their expertise with other schools in the trust. This demonstrates the establishment of a mutually beneficial partnership, in line with the school vision, after less than two years of membership. The Christian foundation of the school is consistently uppermost in any co-operative work within the trust, and also in curricular developments. The chair of governors, who is also a trustee board member, said that there is now a 'stronger Christian distinctiveness' and that 'the children are happier, and have higher expectations'. Academic progress has improved dramatically over the last two years. National data shows that results are now in line with and sometimes above national targets.

All members of staff, governors, pupils, parents, carers and the church feel included in leadership. The vision and the Christian values were decided after careful consultation with all, so that everyone feels involved. They are also well aware of the Biblical origins of both vision and values. In a school with relatively high numbers of disadvantaged pupils, the vision fits perfectly, and stimulates the school's rapid development. An ethos committee chaired by the vicar includes teachers, governors and church members, and reviews the Christian distinctiveness of the school regularly and with vigour. All the recommendations from the previous report have been acted upon with diligence. There is a sense of constant determination to follow the vision in being 'the best that we can be'. This is in fact true of the whole school family.

The welcome extended to everyone, adults, pupils and visitors, is exemplary. There is exceptional care for the disadvantaged. The executive head said 'the financial priority is the vulnerable children'. Staff, guided by the SEND coordinator (SENDSCO), give emotional and practical as well as educational support. She works across all five schools in the trust, and parents as well as staff and pupils are reaping the benefits. Parent workshops on 'talking to your child' have been established by the SENDSCO, 'We're seen as their allies', she said with understandable pride. Aspirations are being raised and confidence is growing. As the executive head put it, 'Love is the key'. The pupils and parents sense it, the staff know and practise it and everyone grows because of it.

The variety of strategies in place to augment and strengthen the curriculum is most impressive. For example there is a close contact with a local farm ('farm school') and there is a forest school area in the grounds. There are also residential trips and weekend adventures such as the 'Exmoor Challenge'. The result is a dramatic widening of the pupils' experiences and understanding. Big questions are frequently explored, the curriculum being tailored to encourage debate and deep thinking about global and local issues. The Christian values and vision guide these discussions, and the pupils relish the challenges presented to them. One commented, 'God reads our minds and guides our decisions!' The school council members are particularly proud of their choice of 'toilet twinning' as their key charity. There is a strong sense of determination to tackle, as far as they can, the injustice and poverty evident in the world. The church and at least one parent have already joined in with a toilet twin of their own.

The vision supports and encourages all the school family to live very well together. Mutual respect and acceptance of differences are underscored by reconciliation and forgiveness on the rare occasions when disagreements do occur. A pupil commented, 'We listen to every side, say sorry and ask for forgiveness'. The mental health of staff and pupils is a high priority. In co-operation with the diocese the Church of England mental health policy has been adopted. Staff are secure in the knowledge that the leaders and their peers will always give caring advice and more when appropriate. One said, 'They won't just say, it's time you went home, but what can I do to help?'

In RE there is a healthy focus on freedom to express ideas. The pupils relish this and are increasingly confident in doing so, with no fear of being 'wrong'. A Year 5/6 discussion about death yielded a challenging question from one pupil, 'Why does God send those who don't believe in him to hell?' The openness and honesty of teachers

and pupils in response to questions such as this are striking. The gentle probing and encouragement to 'go deeper' is leading to growth in maturity for many as moral debate and understanding grows. There is however no consistent approach to spiritual development across the curriculum and as a result opportunities to deepen spiritual reflection are missed. The study of world faiths is strong, with projects on the Holocaust and a visit to the trust's 'World Faith Day' expanding the pupils' understanding to good effect. Parents are supportive, one saying, 'it is important to know about other faiths'. The use of Understanding Christianity units of work in RE extends and strengthens the pupils' understanding of Christianity very effectively. The 'Messy Church club', run at school as an extra-curricular activity and very popular with the pupils, adds an enjoyable extra boost.

Collective worship is relevant, vibrant, varied and reverent. It is also invitational with no preconceptions, so that adults and pupils alike are relaxed and able to join in or not without any pressure. All are fully engaged, and the sensitive and spiritually aware leading of worship builds on the already open hearts and minds, bringing everyone peace and stimulation in equal measure. The school and church communities worship together in church at major festivals and for the leavers' service, and the drama club put on powerful Christian plays at times. For instance, the vicar spoke of his awe and admiration for the group's production of 'The Three Trees' at Easter. Many different people are involved in planning, leading and evaluating worship, including clergy and others from both Anglican and Methodist churches. This brings unity and a variety of approach, enhancing the experiences for all. However, pupils are not yet involved as leaders, but the impact of worship on them and on adults taking part is significant. Monitoring shows that all are lifted and challenged in worship, and learn much about Christian beliefs and practice. A parent commented, 'Our two are teaching us about faith!'

This is a school whose welcoming nature and Christian distinctiveness is bringing Christian love to the whole of the local community. A parent whose children have recently joined said 'I feel we've landed in heaven!'

Head of school	Chris Holding
Inspector's name and number	Mike Graham 286