

National Society Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools Report

Blue Coat Church of England Academy, Walsall

Birmingham Street
Walsall
WS1 2ND

Previous SIAMS grade: Good

This inspection grade: Outstanding

Diocese: Lichfield

Local authority: N/A

Dates of inspection: 24&25 September 2015

Date of last inspection: June 2010

School's unique reference number: 138606

Headteacher: Alan Westerman

Inspector's name and number: Lyn Field 151

School context

Blue Coat is a smaller than average 11-18 school in the centre of Walsall. It converted to academy status in September 2012 sponsored jointly by the Church of England Central Education Trust (CECET) and Holte school in Birmingham. Less than 15% of students are White British. The proportions who speak English as a second language and who have disabilities or special educational needs are well above average. The academy serves an area of high deprivation and over half of students are supported by pupil premium funding. The academy holds the IQM Centre of Excellence award.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of Blue Coat Academy as a Church of England school are outstanding

- The spiritual and inspirational leadership of the Principal has gained the full commitment of staff and students to improving the life chances of students and serving the community.
- Whole school worship in St Matthew's church every Friday defines the school as distinctively Christian yet fully inclusive – a church school for all in the community.
- Partnerships with the church, the diocese and the family of Blue Coat schools strengthens the Church's mission to society in the area.
- Deeply held values permeate every aspect of school life. Students understand them as distinctively Christian and from the perspective of students of other faiths.
- The importance attached to religious education (RE) leads to rapid progress and respect for diversity and difference.

Areas to improve

- Build on the strong progress students make from low starting points to secure higher levels of attainment
- Make better use of summative and formative assessment in RE to ensure the sequence and setting of tasks is closely matched to pupils' needs
- Develop the role of the youth-worker alongside that of the rector to extend the resource for spiritual support of staff and students

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

The central role of faith in the life of the Academy has a direct impact on students' achievement and their preparation for life beyond school. The outstanding role model of the Principal, supported by senior leaders, clearly has a significant impact on the quality of relationships at every level. Although the school holds no formal list of values, all groups identify equality, generosity, compassion, respect and humility as those that characterise the Academy. Students make insightful links to Bible stories to explain their basis in Christian teaching and, in particular, why no form of prejudice is tolerated. Consequently, recorded incidents of homophobic bullying or racism are extremely low. The combination of effective teaching in RE and special Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) days builds students' confidence to challenge false assumptions and apply the values of their faith to ethical and moral issues. The staff make every possible effort to improve the life chances of students. Since becoming an Academy, students' achievement has significantly improved and compares favourably with similar schools. The dip in headline figures for English and maths at GCSE in 2015 partly reflects the even lower than usual starting points of the cohort. Data for current groups suggests improvement will continue in the longer term. The gap between disadvantaged and other students has narrowed each year for both progress and attainment. Transition arrangements both at Year 7 and for the many students who arrive mid-year are highly effective so students on managed moves, because of difficulties in other schools, frequently flourish. Levels of poor behaviour continue to reduce including where the Academy holds students to account for any unacceptable conduct out of school. Figures for attendance are equally positive and continue to rise year on year including for all groups of vulnerable pupils. Sixth form students grow into mature and compassionate young people through taking leadership roles where they motivate others to engage in community projects. Students believe they can make a difference, due in no small part to the impact of Friday worship in raising their aspirations because it is a key tool in the drive to raise standards. This confirms the website statement that 'Our faith informs all we undertake as a school'. The multi-faith context of the Academy is seen by everyone to enrich school life and to strengthen its Christian character. Students are confident to discuss their faith because the honesty of members of staff in sharing their personal beliefs allows students the same freedom. The compulsory nature of RE is therefore fully supported by students and parents and makes a significant contribution to the Christian character of the school. A comment from a senior student that expressed the views of many was that 'this school is in touch with the religious side of human beings and looks more deeply'. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is, therefore, outstanding.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

Worship in the Academy is an example of how faith can unite communities. Each day begins in coming together in forms, year groups or as a whole school. Without exception, these gatherings involve a spiritual element of prayer and worship that engages all staff and students and is valued for the direction it gives to their day. Worship is carefully planned by senior leaders with the rector and meets the needs of both individuals and the community as a whole. Topics for sixth form worship, for example, capture students' interest because they are well matched to their level of maturity. They shape their attitudes to diversity and difference and prompt them to become active in the community. Over time, the daily reflection and prayer supports students in developing their own spirituality, whatever their faith. A truly unique feature of the Academy is the inspirational Friday worship for the whole school in St Matthew's church. It is a high point of the week for staff and students, a 'not to be missed occasion' that sets unequivocal and uncompromising expectations for the values to be lived out in school. These are recognised as shared human values but students understand them from a distinctively Christian perspective whilst also appreciating their significance for students of other faiths. The lasting impact of these occasions, that students experience every week for seven years, cannot be overestimated. They value its spiritual quality and deep sense of belonging to a community whilst experiencing Anglican traditions at first hand. The confidence of staff and students to lead these services is growing because of the enthusiasm and support of the senior leader responsible. Friday worship defines the nature of the Academy because it raises aspirations and is distinctively Christian without compromising the beliefs of anyone present.

The effectiveness of the religious education is good

RE results are some of the strongest in the Academy at GCSE with the proportion of students gaining a grade C or better moving above national figures. This success continues with good uptake at A level. The RE department works very effectively as part of the humanities faculty. This means that whole school initiatives to improve students' learning are implemented with the same consistency as in other subjects. Given the exceptionally low starting points of students entering the Academy, the focus on raising literacy skills is essential. However, it is important that, as this becomes part of the structure of lessons and of teachers' marking in RE, a proper balance is maintained with the assessment of RE specific skills. There is some inconsistency in the written feedback to students in the lower years, so it is not clear to them where they have done well in RE terms and how they can improve. The focus on critical thinking makes a strong contribution to building students' confidence and ability to express their opinions and respond to different viewpoints with reason and sensitivity. This is because units of work are well chosen to address issues that students encounter in today's society so regularly capture their interest. Teachers are RE specialists and passionate about the subject and so their knowledge enables them to deal effectively with the many questions that arise. There is an easy dialogue in lessons because relationships are excellent and there is a strong culture of respect for all religious beliefs which permeates students' work in other subjects. The majority of teaching is good and some is outstanding so students make good and often better progress. Those who are disadvantaged do better than in their other subjects and as well as their peers. Collaborative learning develops well as students move through the school although the sequence of lessons does not always help younger students to build on previous learning. Changes to assessment are being made against the backdrop of developments in RE nationally. Sensible decisions have been made about a pattern of assessment to track progress so that the outcomes can be better used to inform planning and target setting.

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

The spiritual leadership of the Principal has been the key factor in the school's journey of improvement over the last three years. His personal faith has meant that the Christian character of the school has remained high profile in the urgency to raise standards and has driven the improvement agenda. This is because the message of the Gospel '*compels and encourages staff in equal measure to do the best we can so that our pupils have the same opportunity as other young people regardless of their background*'. The successful approach to inclusion, behaviour and attendance is rooted in Christian values. It delivers the clear vision of the Academy's sponsors for students to grow as citizens alongside their academic progress. The sponsors monitor the school closely and, like the governors, know the school well and achieve an effective balance between challenge and support for leaders. Careful recruitment and increasing confidence of staff to take responsibility for aspects of the Christian character mean that the ethos is sustained at all levels. The statutory requirements for RE and collective worship are fully met. RE has benefited from a supportive faculty system. This has promoted the dissemination of good practice and raised standards.

The Academy's partnerships have a huge impact on cohesion across the school, faith and local communities. Excellent relations with the Blue Coat Family of Junior and Infant schools offers parents a distinctively Christian education for their children from 4-19. Links with the church enrich both communities through more innovative work than is usually seen. The forthcoming festival around 'Blue Coat Sunday' involves all subject departments in the theme of 'Love thy neighbour'. One of the ways this is being explored is in the context of the European migrant issue and demonstrates how, across the curriculum, the school does not shy away from addressing sensitive issues in the context of faith. The pastoral support of the rector is valued by Academy staff and the appointment of a youth worker has been well received and prompted discussion of how more chaplaincy-style work might benefit both staff and students. This reflects the culture of constant review that exists among leaders who know exactly where action is most needed in any area of school life. They have been relentless in maintaining a very visible presence in engaging with communities in Walsall. This has restored relations to a level not enjoyed for several years. Numbers on roll are rising and Year 7 is full.