

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

The Blue Coat Church of England School

Egerton Street, Oldham. OLI 3SQ	
Current SIAMS inspection grade	Outstanding
Diocese	Manchester
Previous SIAMS inspection grade	Outstanding
Date of academy conversion	1 August 2011
Name of multi-academy trust (MAT)	The Cranmer Education Trust
Dates of inspection	23 & 24 November 2016
Date of last inspection	7 & 8 December 2011
Type of school and unique reference number	Academy 137133
Headteacher & MAT chief executive officer	Julie Hollis
Inspector's name and number	Barbara Easton 862

School context

The Blue Coat School is a large, mixed, high performing academy located in an area of significant disadvantage but drawing pupils from a wide radius. The proportion of children in receipt of pupil premium or with English as an additional language is small but significant and growing. Learners with special educational needs, disabilities and health plans are slightly above national average. Blue Coat was originally a stand-alone academy but, since the last inspection, has become the founding school of the Cranmer Education Trust. The school is currently exploring strategies to meet the extensive demand for further provision.

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

- The deeply Christian vision that everyone should be 'everything you can be, and are meant to be' is thoroughly embedded throughout the school so that pupils and staff together flourish under the challenge.
- Broad provision for curricular excellence and extra-curricular opportunity secures Blue Coat's aspiration that learners should aspire to 'life in all its fullness'. This develops young people as well-rounded individuals who expect to serve the good of the community while at school and the wider world when they are older.
- The school is a remarkable community, securely founded in its Christian identity yet modelling unity in diversity. Notwithstanding its size, everyone is deeply known and cared about. The ethos of supporting others is prioritised at every level so that Christian neighbourliness is a hallmark for all who encounter the school, both at a personal and organisational level.
- The head's reflective faith drives her exceptional leadership of the school. This has enabled Blue Coat to sustain a golden thread of tradition while discerning a new vocation in the service of education in Oldham.

Areas to improve

- Ensure Blue Coat's Christian ethos evolves with the school, both in responding to the challenges of increasing diversity and in embracing the new opportunities of leadership within the MAT.
- Ensure that the opportunities for worship in class are of a consistent quality across the school, taking into account the different ages of pupils, the changes in demographic and preparedness of new staff.

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

The school's motto, 'Everything you can be, and are meant to be' is the hallmark of every aspect of life at Blue Coat. From this one sentence, the school articulates a Christian vision of what it might mean to be the person God intends, modelled on the person of Jesus and the language of the New Testament. This narrative is consistent across the school, led by the headteacher and grounded in the regular acts of worship. Because of this, learners at all levels are ambitious, work hard and achieve very well, leading one youngster to say, 'School moulds me to be the very best version of myself.' Aspiring to be 'the best' means that children and staff together flourish in an atmosphere which combines a high level of challenge with extensive support and individual care. Standards of attainment are high with results often significantly above local and national averages. In 2015 the school was just outside the top 5% school nationally for attainment at GCSE and every year, a small but significant number of sixth formers take up places at Oxford and Cambridge, successfully breaking the glass ceiling in an area of educational disadvantage. However, being 'the best' is more than a focus on examination success – it is a holistic challenge to fullness of life for each individual in the service of others. This is articulated by everyone in the school and evident in the conduct of learners and their supportive attitudes to one another. Since the last inspection, the school has changed significantly because it chose to broaden its admissions criteria better to serve its local area. However, because of the strength of vision it has 'not skipped a beat'. Although much more diverse, it is a model of social cohesion because it places a deliberate emphasis on belonging together. Worship and religious education contribute significantly to this, through the opportunities they give learners to learn about and reflect on difference. Throughout the school, children work collaboratively and visibly care for each other so that relationships are excellent. No-one 'is allowed to be a bystander' and everyone has a 'go-to person to bring them on'. Even in such a big school, all children are intimately known. This is partly because of a consistent Blue Coat heritage of excellent care, but also because of the school's systematic use of high quality pastoral and monitoring programmes so that 'no child falls through the net'. Because the school has pioneered a detailed, and widely acclaimed, programme of character development, spiritual, moral, social and cultural education is securely grounded throughout the school. About 30% sixth formers come as 'New Blues' under open admissions each year. They, and their families, speak gratefully about the ease with which they are embraced by the welcome of the school. Care for the most vulnerable learners is transformational. Pupils with a history of difficulty in other settings have had their lives turned around by the work of the Green Room. Here, encouraging and imaginative staff embody another saying frequently heard in the school: 'there is no problem to which we cannot find a solution.' The school has a palpable atmosphere of positivity. The mood is calm but children buzz with enthusiasm. At breaks and lunchtimes the school is alive with extra-curricular opportunities where levels of participation and inclusion are high as youngsters find different opportunities to be their best away from the classroom, leading one learner to sum up his time at Blue Coat: 'Best. Experience. Ever'.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

People across the whole school community speak of the importance of worship to them, with the big acts of worship in the church and the school Eucharists particularly valued. The chaplain plans the programme thoroughly, resourcing worship with a range of supporting media. Imagination and creativity make worship engaging and memorable for participants of all ages. Learners report that they find it thought-provoking, challenging and 'interactive'; an older member of the school community commented 'It's such fun!' Cross curricular links mean that opportunities for reflection and response are broadened beyond formal worship times. For example, the Easter Art project stimulated moving responses to Holy Week and provided a rich resource for further use in worship. The contribution of music to worship is particularly valued. One observer remarked, 'The conductor exudes spirituality and the children respond with real purpose.' This deeply embedded spirituality was illustrated on a recent trip to London, when the choir responded to the scientific majesty of the Great Hall of the Natural History Museum by giving a spontaneous rendition of Bruckner's 'Locus Iste' (This place was made by God). The arc of the liturgical year gives deliberate shape to school life, so that momentum builds towards the school's celebrations of Christmas and Easter instead of winding down at the end of term. The school intentionally ensures that major Christian festivals are a time of joy and meaning for the whole community, especially those children and adults who will find the holidays difficult. During the inspection, over 300 charity shoe boxes were dispatched and the Advent Project for the local foodbank was launched. The chaplain prepares the themes for each year prayerfully. As well as reflecting and embedding the school's values generally, each year is governed by a Biblical text which forms the context for each act of collective worship and the closing prayers. Thus, through worship, a Christian perspective on the world's issues is permeating children's developing thinking. Form worship is lively and engaging. Learners particularly enjoy these more informal settings, as the discussion allows them to engage with 'what it might mean to carry the values of Christian faith in the modern world'. Levels of participation in all forms of worship are high. However, the materials for class worship need to be differentiated across the school in ways appropriate to learners' ages and backgrounds. The quiet, prayerful strength of the chaplain is appreciated by all. Staff speak of his

work as 'genius' because he not only equips adults from a range of backgrounds to lead meaningful worship but, through his work, stimulates a thoughtful interest about faith at every level of the school community.

The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding

Standards in religious education are high throughout the school, with results for examination religious studies consistently above school and national averages. This is in no small part due to the commitment of staff. Learners volunteered particular appreciation of their RE teachers, especially because 'they are reliable' and give 'really good feedback'. One commented 'RS is the lesson they push us the most in'. In lessons, learners thoughtfully engage with challenging topics: sixth formers were observed grappling meaningfully with Descartes while Year 11s argued animatedly about the value of liturgical worship. The standards of written work are particularly high with learners displaying impressive stamina for writing. Staff consistently model high expectations so that even the most vulnerable learners surprise themselves with what they can achieve. The drive for standards does not restrict flair and creativity, as evidenced by the moving examples in the Easter art project and Holocaust scrap books. Trips and visits significantly enhance learning, with challenging work on display sharing learners' reflections on the existence of God and the value of hope following their visit to Auschwitz. The Year 7 Faith Day, where children meet a range of different religious people, was widely spoken of as 'fantastic' because it built relationships across the boundaries of difference. The strong subject knowledge of skilled staff creates a stimulating but secure environment for exploration of faith. Learners enjoy RE and speak thoughtfully about its impact on their own faith development. Youngsters are confident to challenge and question with the result that they feel they are developing their own faith, owning it independently of their upbringing and church attendance. They value the opportunity to study the religions of their neighbours as it enriches their own understanding, enabling them to appreciate faith in different ways: 'I get a better understanding of my own religion because I hear other people's opinions of it.' The head of department's thoughtful enthusiasm provides dynamic leadership to a strong team. Through her strategic leadership of planning, resourcing and evaluation she ensures that the team can be more than the sum of its excellent parts.

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

The Head's deep personal faith underpins her exceptional leadership. People speak of her as the 'foundation of the school', particularly emphasising her constant reinforcement of the language of values. With insight and humility she has steered Blue Coat to reconsider what it means to be 'everything it is meant to be' for its children and its community today. Due to her vision, governors' commitment and staff enthusiasm, Blue Coat has been able to embrace significant change, becoming a more open and diverse community without compromising the school's traditions of excellence and care. Governors are conscientious and challenging, forward looking and supportive. School leaders know their organisation very well. They are thorough in their analysis of ways in which it can do even better and respond with rigorous and imaginative strategies. The range of additional classes put on by the RE team to target the performance of different groups at A' level is just one example of the dedication of staff to even greater achievement. The school has been particularly alert to the needs of vulnerable learners. Governors continually ask what more the school, as a Christian school, can do to serve. In response, Blue Coat has willingly taken on the lead role in school improvement within the academy trust and shares its strength with others through its role in initial teacher training, teaching leaders and as a teaching school. By working on the wider map, the school receives back many benefits of partnership. An example of this is the encouragement of the head of RE to be an assessor in the national Quality Mark scheme. This puts the RE department at the leading edge of current practice and future developments, while allowing Blue Coat expertise to benefit the RE community more widely. A variety of structures are in place to ensure that staff are supported and developed at every level. In growing new, sometimes young, senior leaders, the school is particularly addressing the issues of succession planning in church schools. The links with the wider church are important at Blue Coat. People treasure the attachment to the parish church because they value the special services there. Staff in the Green Room go out of their way to help anxious children who might feel overwhelmed in the grand building, building a special relationship with some of the elderly volunteers at the church. Since the last inspection Blue Coat has developed learners' sense of the global variety of Christianity by forming a relationship with the Church in Pakistan. Meeting Christians who live in a much more challenging context has made a deep impression on children in the school, making them value their experience at Blue Coat in a wholly different way.