



DIOCESE OF BRENTWOOD

Denominational (S48) Inspection Report

Name of School: St John's School
Local Authority: Essex County Council

Inspection Date: 6th May 2022

Reporting Inspector: Tom Cahill (Lead Inspector)
Damian Fox (Associate Inspector)

This Inspection was carried out under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005 and 2011.

Type of School:	Special	School Address:	Turpin's Lane
School Category:	Non maintained		Woodford Bridge
Age range of pupils:	5-19		Essex
Gender of pupils:	Mixed		IG8 8AX
Number on roll:	99	Tel. No.	0208 504 1818
Appropriate Authority:	The Governing Body/ Trustees	Headteacher:	Mrs Wendy Killilea
Date of previous inspection:	27 April 2016	Chair of Governors:	Sr Julie Rose

Information about the school

St John's is a Catholic Special School located in the County of Essex and in the Diocese of Brentwood. It is a non-maintained school in the trusteeship of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. It has been providing Catholic education for over 120 years to the local community and it was one of the first special schools to be established in England. The school's designation is for students with moderate to severe and complex learning difficulties, including communication difficulties such as autism. There are 99 students on roll (17 primary students and 82 secondary students.) The school is co-educational for students aged 5 – 19. A post 19 special college for adults is also located on the school site. There are 19 full-time teachers, of whom 10 are Catholic. The majority of teachers teach Religious Education.

20% of pupils are Catholic. 30% are from other Christian faiths and 30% are from other faith backgrounds. The school is located within the parish of St Thomas of Canterbury, but is most closely associated with the Chigwell Convent which is adjacent to the school. The school currently admits pupils from 10 local authorities, including areas of great deprivation. The number of pupils eligible for free school meals is well above average at 52%. 4% of pupils are in the care of the local authority with a significant number known to social care. All pupils have a statement of special educational needs.

Since the last inspection in 2016, the school has appointed a new Headteacher as well as a new subject leader for Religious Education. The needs of students now attending the school are also more profound and challenging as the school accepts children from many local authorities including a significant number of London boroughs.

The school has addressed the recommendations made in the last inspection report in 2016. The school's policy for RSE is compliant with guidelines issued by Brentwood Diocese. The Religious Education curriculum as shown on the school timetable is less than the 10% required by the Bishop's Conference. However, taking into account how Religious Education is interwoven across all subjects and activities throughout the school day, inspectors agree that, taking into account the nature of the school, the school more than meets these guidelines.

Key grades for inspection

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1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Requires improvement 4: Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of this Catholic school

Grade 1

St John's is an outstandingly effective Catholic school providing the highest quality Catholic education for students of all faiths and none who have moderate to severe learning difficulties. As a result, students thrive in this highly inclusive and cohesive multi-faith community. The school has Christ at the centre of all its work ensuring that each student is loved, respected and cared for by a talented and dedicated staff. Leaders and governors have an excellent understanding of the purpose of Catholic education which is shared by all staff. The school is truly Catholic with an option for the poor and disadvantaged, that is, in the context of the school, those with profound learning needs although many students come from a deprived background. They have an exceptionally strong moral purpose to provide the best education and care for the students in their charge. The school's unique and high-quality provision makes it a beacon of Catholic SEN provision in Brentwood and beyond.

What the school should do to improve further:

- Continue to embed the evidence for the learning assessment scheme within the Religious Education curriculum at all Key Stages.
- Develop an outdoor prayer garden to further enhance the prayer life offered by the school.

Students attending St John's benefit hugely from its outstanding provision for students with significant learning difficulties. Students told inspectors that they felt safe and secure and enjoyed being part of St John's community. They very much appreciated the hard work and dedication of their teachers who go the extra mile to ensure the students in their charge are loved, respected and cared for. The school's mission is summed up in the words of St John: "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full". Students are also very caring and look out for one another. They are very welcoming, well behaved and excellent ambassadors for their school in which they take great pride in. The strong sense of family and of well-being and very positive atmosphere engendered by the school contributes significantly to the outstanding pastoral care enjoyed by the students.

Students are given every support and encouragement to develop their God given talents and readily take on responsibility. They respond positively to the opportunity to be the class helper or class prefect for the day as well as being members of the school council. The students also raise significant amounts of money for those who are less fortunate. They support many charities such as CAFOD, Macmillan Cancer, HCPT and Children in need.

The much-loved Chaplain is well known and held in high regard by the school community. Unfortunately, at the time of the inspection he was unavailable due to illness. When speaking with the students, it was clear they are inspired by his words and actions. He also supports students to receive the sacraments especially where they are unable to participate in their own parishes. A number of students have also been baptised into the Catholic faith by the Chaplain reflecting the important evangelising role the school has to the many students and their families who are not Catholic. He also regularly organises an annual trip to Lourdes for students although due to the recent pandemic, it has not been able to take place in recent years.

Students are encouraged to use Makaton sign language supporting the school's drive to be a total communication environment where visual communication is as important as verbal communication. The school provides a wide range of support to students through full time student mentors as well as a dedicated family support worker. The school also employs speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and a music therapist. The school makes excellent use of offsite provision to enrich the curriculum such as the local drama centre and swimming pool. This is an example of the school's contribution to social justice ensuring all students have equal opportunities to develop and thrive.

Almost all parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the school staff. They too appreciate the tremendous efforts of staff in caring for their children. They know their children receive exceptional love and care as well as a high-quality Catholic education. As one parent said "My child very much enjoys being at St John's. When going into the school, I am always struck by the family atmosphere there. I am always made to feel very welcome by the staff who are always polite, caring and approachable ". Inspectors fully endorse similar comments and views expressed by the vast majority of parents. The school places the needs of all its students above all else. Parents are kept very well informed through the weekly school newsletter which highlights liturgical celebrations and key events of the Church calendar.

Leadership and governance at the school is outstanding. The school proudly proclaims its Catholic heritage and is fully committed to passing on the values of the Catholic faith which are made explicit to the students and their families as well as visitors to the school. The many beautiful religious icons and imagery around the school reinforce the Catholic ethos including a beautiful mosaic by the entrance to the main teaching block. The Headteacher leads by example through servant leadership providing a strong blend of both support and challenge to the staff. The governing body leads in a similar fashion and works harmoniously with school leaders. Leaders and governors know their school exceptionally well. Their self-evaluation of the strengths and areas for development for the school is rigorous and accurate and inspectors fully endorsed the grades awarded by the school in its own self-evaluation.

Staff morale is very high and staff turnover is low. The school encourages staff to develop professionally and several support staff have qualified as teachers working at the school. The school places great importance on the well-being and work life balance of the staff.

Governors are regular visitors to the school and have appropriate committees in place to monitor and support the Catholic life and work of the school. The executive principal oversees the work of 2 Catholic SEN schools and is committed to the sharing of good practice and resources at both schools and at all levels. She is also a senior figure in the Order of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary whose charism is reflected in the all-pervading Catholic ethos found throughout the school. The school works for the common good and collaborates closely with the Diocese of Brentwood and its schools sharing good practice in supporting students with complex learning needs. The school has a college provision on site working in partnership with New City College supporting young adults with complex learning difficulties helping them to move into adulthood and progress to further education or day services.

Students enjoy their Religious Education lessons. They are engaged and inspired by the carefully planned lessons and resources which are tailored to meet the needs of each child. They benefit from small group learning and are always supported by additional support staff who are highly skilled in supporting the classroom teacher during Religious Education lessons. As a result, students make at least good progress taking into account their prior attainment, level of cognitive ability and learning needs. As one parent said "Whilst I am aware of what my son does in Religious Education. He is the one who comes home to tell me what he has learnt as he will sing or tell me about it. I am very happy that my son attends St John's school"

Their learning is further enhanced by the bright and inspiring classrooms which have high quality displays to reinforce their learning in the subject. In the recent Synod Survey, the excellent response from the students and results reflected the very positive attitudes of students to their Religious Education lessons

Religious Education teachers are skilled at designing lessons which enable each student to be challenged and to make progress. They are supported by an outstanding subject leader who provides half termly INSET to all teachers and support staff to ensure they have the confidence to deliver good and outstanding Religious Education lessons on a regular basis.

Assessment procedures are now a strength of the school and these are being rolled out across all subject areas including Religious Education. The 'Evidence for Learning' scheme has been adapted to reflect the needs and requirements of students in a specialist setting. The school is making good progress in linking the scheme to the Religious Education curriculum and inspectors agree this should remain a priority. Every student has at least a termly assessment and the progress of each individual informs planning for subsequent lessons. The progress of each child is clearly seen through the Learning Journey journal which is produced for each learner and updated on a regular basis.

The school uses a bespoke curriculum based on the Come and See programme and it reflects the guidelines of the Religious Education Catholic Directory including detailed coverage of other world religions. For older students it offers external qualifications based on the AQA unit award scheme as well as Asdan. The school is a recognised Centre of Excellence for Asdan awards.

Leaders and governors have robust systems in place to monitor the quality of teaching in Religious Education as well as the progress students make. They are very supportive of the Religious Education department and they ensure it is well resourced at a level which matches other core subjects. There is a link governor for the department and governor visits are organised on a regular basis. The subject leader is very experienced and provides outstanding leadership to all staff who teach Religious Education.

Collective worship at St John's is outstanding and is always a positive celebration and affirmation of life. Students show spontaneous and heartfelt prayerful behaviour during collective worship. They are keen to be involved through singing, role play, signing for others and writing and reading prayers and demonstrate high levels of engagement. They very much enjoy their regular assemblies. During the inspection, the upper school assembly took place with the theme of the story of Creation. Students read, signed, sang and danced joyously and took inspiration from each other as well as staff who keenly and happily joined in with all the activities and prayers. A school choir has been recently established and the singing has further enhanced the quality of collective worship at the school

The school provides students with many opportunities for collective worship. They are very well supported by a local parish priest who is also the school chaplain and who, until recently, served as Chair of the governing body. He is well known by the students and staff and is highly held in high regard by all the school community. During his recent absence, the subject leader for Religious Education has taken on extra responsibility to ensure students continue to benefit from high quality collective worship together with support from other local priests. During the season of Lent, she organised a multisensory service for the Stations of the Cross which took place in the grounds of the school which greatly enhanced students' understanding of the pain and suffering of Christ.

The school, until the start of the Covid pandemic had access to the beautiful chapel which is part of the convent which adjoins the school. Its design, stunning stain glass windows and icons and statues creates a very special atmosphere which contributes significantly to the spiritual development of the students. At the time of the inspection, access to the chapel was restricted due to the pandemic but the school is looking forward to resuming regular use of the chapel in the coming months. In the meantime, inspectors recommend the school develops an outdoor prayer garden in the spacious grounds of the school to further enhance the prayer life of students and staff.

Leaders and governors have robust systems in place to monitor the quality of collective worship and the prayer life of the school. Leaders have a high profile at school assemblies and masses and other liturgical events such as the Christmas carol service. Governors are always invited to attend these celebrations and are always represented highlighting their commitment to the Catholic life of the school.