

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SCHOOL

St. Gabriel's Roman Catholic High School and Specialist College is an 11-16 voluntary aided school serving the north Bury parishes of Guardian Angels, St. Joseph, St. Marie, St. Hilda and St. Joseph in Ramsbottom. The social and economic background of pupils is broadly average. The planned admission number is 209 and there are 1021 pupils on roll. 973 of the learners are Roman Catholics. The proportion of pupils qualifying for free school meals is well below the national average. 223 are identified as having special educational needs and 15 have a statutory statement of special educational need. Almost all pupils have English as their first language but there 44 recently arrived pupils from Poland. Attainment on entry is average. 35 of the 63 teachers (56%) are Catholics.

OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SCHOOL

St Gabriel's is an outstanding Catholic school. This is because Catholic principles and their practice are at the heart of the school. The Mission Statement pervades all aspects of school life. It states that "We are a Catholic community, united by Christ's teaching. Prayer and mutual respect establish a sense of belonging as we strive to live the Gospel message." These ideals are seen in policy and planning documents but more significantly in the daily activities and ethos of the school. The Christian leadership of the head, supported by senior leadership and the governors, acts as an inspiration and thus fulfils one of the aims of the school, "to bring pupils to an awareness of Christ." As a result of their determination the school is blessed with high quality and effective provision for Religious Education and collective worship.

Improvement since the last inspection

The three issues arising from the last inspection in November 2005 have been addressed. A governor has been designated to link with the Religious Education department. She also links with the general religious life of the school. Information Communication Technology is well integrated into the work of The Religious Education department. An area has been put aside as a prayer area and an altar installed. However further work is required to give this area a more overt religious "feel".

Capacity to improve

The school's self-evaluation is outstanding. There is a clear awareness of what the school is doing, what needs to be done for even further improvements and a realistic strategy in order to achieve this. This applies both to the school as a whole and to the work of the Religious Education department

What the school should do to improve further

- Further develop the use and embellishment of the prayer area.
- Commence the financial planning for the appointment of a lay chaplain, supplemented by a job description and policy statement to outline the chaplain's role and method of operating.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT OF THE CATHOLIC LIFE OF THE SCHOOL

The leadership and management of the Catholic life of the school are outstanding. There is a total personal and professional commitment to the widely known Mission Statement and its implementation – thus ensuring that this is a Catholic institution of very high calibre. In policy and practice, the aim that “we strive to live the Gospel message in a stimulating Christian environment where each person should be known and loved” is consciously adopted. The school’s sex education policy, using a carefully planned cross-curricular approach, is a good example of this. The leadership team’s clear vision and example ensure that all matters pertaining to the school as a Catholic institution are fully in place. This is seen in the provision of staffing, resources, extra time for religious activities and the arrangements for the forthcoming School Mission but especially in the provision of high quality pastoral care. This care feeds into academic success. Prayers are said at staff briefings along with a weekly meditation. The Just Youth team train staff and pupils in regard to mentoring which is a valued aspect of school life. There are good standards of behaviour, relationships and widespread concern for others. Standards of inclusion are very high with minimal exclusions. The result of this is a genuine community and family atmosphere – a frequently heard comment during the inspection. The governors, especially the very active chairman and link governor give active and informed support to the school and its religious aims.

THE QUALITY OF COLLECTIVE WORSHIP

Provision for collective worship is outstanding. The school provides a wide range of liturgical services and opportunities of such quality that, as one teacher expressed it, “the quality of the spiritual life flows naturally into care for others”. Form tutors have an excellent prayer booklet supplemented by a variety of themes. Pupils’ planners contain varied prayers for use in form time. Several local priests celebrate a weekly voluntary Mass and liturgies for the key periods of the Church’s year such as Christmas and Lent. There is widespread appreciation of the welcome Mass for new pupils and the Leavers Mass. The staff Mass at the start of the year includes a commissioning and blessing. During the inspection a year assembly provided a deep spiritual experience. It raised many cultural and religious issues and involved some wonderful African music, organised by the head of music and sung by over thirty pupils. Many departments, especially music, art and drama make a contribution. A bi-annual prayer chain deeply enhances personal prayer. A prayer area has recently been opened with a new altar but still needs artefacts and decoration to drive home its function. The needs of non-Catholic pupils and of other world religions are recognised. The school possesses an eco-garden, “HENE”, and plans are afoot to use it for prayers and meditation. Plants reflecting religious themes and ideas are already growing. Pupils in Years 8 and 10 can attend residential retreats at Castlerigg Manor. These are exceptionally popular and valued, one pupil stating that “I learnt how to pray”. All pupils in Key Stage 3 attend day retreats. There is an agreed need for a lay chaplain.

ACHIEVEMENT AND STANDARDS IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Achievement and standards in Religious Education are good with some outstanding features. The pupils make good progress relative to their ability. Pupils’ work and progress is well monitored and at Key Stage 3 attainment is good. The GCSE results in Religious Education are good. In 2006 73% of candidates obtained Grades A* to C. In 2007, this dropped to 71% but rose in 2008 to 75%. These results are above the national average and amongst the best results in the school. Three candidates were among the top ten out of 67731 entered for the Edexcel Examinations Board. Almost all pupils are entered and 100% obtained grades A* to G. These results stem from effective strategies such as examination preparation sessions, greater pace and challenge in Key Stage 3, the production of a high quality revision booklet and teachers’ commitment to provide extra study time. Relationships in and out of the classroom are excellent and are among the outstanding features of the school. Generous donations are made to a wide range of charities with a particular commitment to the diocesan Rescue Society. A special initiative with widespread support is Bury African Outreach. This provides education and accommodation for AIDS/HIV orphans in Uganda and was initiated by a teacher’s wife. Other charitable work includes Christmas Hampers, the MAD (Make a Difference) group writing to MPs on behalf of CAFOD and an annual coffee morning in aid of an orphanage in Bolivia. These actions make a significant contribution towards social cohesion and the cultural development of pupils.

THE QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The quality of teaching and learning in curriculum Religious Education is outstanding. The department is line-managed by the deputy headteacher and regularly reviewed. The planning for lessons is very good and teaching is well paced, cheerful, confident and enthusiastic. The tone of lessons is friendly and purposeful. A variety of teaching styles is used with good use of information communication technology. Teachers show a real concern for pupils' academic progress and their personal welfare. The teachers are well qualified, well-informed and have a personal commitment to their subject. There are six non-specialist teachers but such is their commitment, linked to the exceptional support they receive from the head of department, that to replace them all with a specialist would be loss to the school. There is a variety of material to suit the needs of pupils of all abilities. Pupils' routine work is marked and levels of achievement are identified through tests at the end of each module. Pupils are fully aware of their meaning and purpose. Pupils have high regard for the teachers and subject. They particularly enjoy the controversial topics and the discussions relating to them. Progress is enhanced by pupils' good behaviour and co-operative quality group work. There is good display work in all the classrooms and in public areas. The department is fortunate to have a suite of four rooms and full use is made of the facilities thereby provided.

THE QUALITY OF THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CURRICULUM

Overall the quality of the Religious Education curriculum is good with outstanding features. This is because the Salford Diocesan syllabus is not only fully implemented in Key Stage 3 but is being reviewed in anticipation of the publication of a revised edition. In Key Stage 4 the Edexcel syllabus enables pupils to study Catholic issues in depth. During the inspection lessons dealt with abortion, euthanasia, evil and suffering. It was encouraging to notice that the emphasis was on pupils' personal understanding, not just on analysis in order to pass examinations. Whilst pupils are encouraged to think issues through for themselves there is a clear backcloth of Catholic teaching. The directive from the bishops' of England and Wales that 10% of curriculum time be given to Religious Education is fully observed. Teachers share their ideas and resources, a particular strength of the department. The curriculum includes a study of aspects of other Christian faiths and world religions particularly Islam, Hinduism and Judaism. There was a recent visit to the Jewish Museum. There are strong links with other departments. The department makes a major input to the Personal, Health Social and Citizen Education programme known in the school as "Lesson 5". Thus the Religious Education department makes a significant contribution to the pupils' moral, cultural and spiritual development.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT OF CURRICULUM RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The leadership and management of curriculum Religious Education are outstanding. This is because there is a clear and dynamic thread of leadership from the headteacher, senior management, governors and the team leader. The Religious Education department has a recently appointed head of department and a second in department. Their newness does not mean that they are finding their way and there is a maturity about their style of management. All the teachers have great confidence in the head of department's leadership which is characterised by a quiet but firm and enthusiastic determination. This has resulted in excellent team work, a commonality of purpose and excellent standards of co-operation. Books and resources are up to date and technology is well used. The headteacher and senior leadership team give active support, as seen in the staffing structure, the provision of excellent facilities and resources, for example the new teachers' workroom. The department has an improvement plan which clearly demonstrates a determination to improve standards and to work within the priorities of the school. Departmental documentation is quite outstanding, including the department's own aims of "bringing pupils to an awareness of Christ." The governors are fully aware of the work of the department thanks to their "link governor" and the informed and enthusiastic chairman.