



## **INSPECTION REPORT OF DENOMINATIONAL CHARACTER AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

(Under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005)

### **ST BERNARD'S VOLUNTARY AIDED CATHOLIC GRAMMAR SCHOOL**

Langley Road, Slough, SL3 7AF

DfE School No: 871/4700

URN: 110084

Head Teacher: Mr M Stimpson  
Chair of Governors: Mrs M Boland

Reporting Inspector: Mr J Shinkwin  
Associate Inspector: Mrs F Topa

**Dates of Inspection: 19 – 20 June 2017**

Date Report Issued: 30 June 2017

The School is in the Trusteeship of the Diocese and  
in partnership with Slough Local Authority

### **Information about the school**

St Bernard's is the only Catholic, mixed, state, voluntary-aided grammar school in the country. There are 56 members of teaching staff, 24 of whom are Catholic (43%). Students are from a mix of socio-economic backgrounds. 74% of students are Roman Catholic with approximately 40% from within Slough. Other students travel from a broad area within a radius of 20 miles. Of the school population of 863, 54% are white British and Irish, 16% from other white backgrounds, 30% of coloured or mixed race origin. Six students claim for free school meals; 14 students are on the SEN register and three students have Education, Health Care Plans. Attainment on entry is well above the national norm but the range of attainment on entry is wider than is usually found in selective schools because of St Bernard's denominational nature and because Slough has sufficient places for 45% of secondary aged students to attend a grammar school.

### **Key grades for inspection**

1: Outstanding      2: Good      3: Satisfactory      4: Unsatisfactory

### **Overall effectiveness of this Catholic school**

**Grade 1**

St Bernard's continues to be an outstanding Catholic school. Spiritual development is at the core of school life and the quality of relationships reflects this. Students achieve excellent public examination results with progress relative to ability being remarkably high, especially in Religious Education; this is a testament to the culture of the school. The Head is an outstanding leader who is very committed to the school's Catholic mission; he has systematically advanced the school, especially in relation to teaching and learning. He is very well supported by staff and governors. The RE department is a superbly led and dedicated team. Chaplaincy is central to school life as illustrated by the whole school retreat on Ash Wednesday. In the 247 questionnaires received from Year 7-10 parents (other year groups were on study leave) the overwhelming majority were delighted with the school. Typical responses were "St Bernard's encourages its students to develop into discerning, considerate and passionate individuals as well as adept scholars" and "the aim of the teachers is to educate the heart as well as the mind of each pupil; this is evident in the unique familial atmosphere of the school."

### **The school's capacity for sustained improvement**

**Grade 1**

There is a culture of continuous striving to improve which has enhanced the excellence in Catholic education identified in the previous inspection. This is grounded in analysis of gathered data e.g. during the inspection students were completing the annual (anonymous) students' questionnaire. The RE department is an excellent example of this - they continually seek to improve on outstanding results with a strong focus on what makes a difference. Morale is high and there is a strong sense of being part of a very special community where teaching and learning is a vocation. There is a tangible sense of partnership between staff and students following the tradition of the Bernadine sisters. The Sixth Form is a great strength of the school - this is especially evident on the Feast of Guardian Angels when Year 13 lead and manage the school and offer opportunities for social, cultural and personal development, another recent new initiative. The recommendation from the last inspection regarding diagnostic marking has been strongly built upon - this has evolved into the "purple pen" teacher pupil dialogue in books which deepens understanding when used well.

### **What the school should do to improve further**

- The standard of lesson planning is very high. As the new schemes of work become more familiar, further develop creative strategies which link the material to the students' experience
- Continue to develop the excellent "purple pen" pupil dialogue with teachers' marking comments
- There is a clear school system for dealing with behaviour infractions. Apply this more consistently to deal with occasional low level disruption like off-task communication in class
- More emphasis on the hierarchy of thinking skills in learning, perhaps integrating this more explicitly into the levels charts in exercise.

## **Outcomes for pupils**

## **Grade 1**

There is a very strong sense of family within the school and the pupils feel valued and loved enabling them to thrive within this community; this is helped by activities such as Year 11 students mentoring those who have joined the school in Year 7. They are keen to learn and ask good questions in class where there is a palpable sense of endeavour and mutual support. Students express their own views and beliefs confidently; they are well taught in their faith, proud of their beliefs and have a strong sense of personal worth. Pupils lead and take responsibility for shaping Chaplaincy activities especially the well-trained Sixth Form Eucharistic ministers and catechists. Most students are mature for their age and have an attitude of service, no doubt helped by the well-developed PSHE programme and General RE. They are responsive to the needs of others e.g. student run campaigns such as Love in a Box; the whole school is galvanised in supporting the well-established partnership with South African township schools, a great example of Catholic faith in action.

Students value whole school Masses and assemblies and consider them a key element in bringing the community together - they help them to pray. The students conduct themselves with reverence and respect. Owing to public examinations in the School Hall, it was not possible to observe an assembly but the RE Advisor for the Diocese recently observed a very well planned and executed Headmaster's assembly. The students said they enjoyed his stories and sense of humour! They pray in their forms at the start of the day and in some classes and feel comfortable making personal prayers within these groups. Prayer is an integral part of their lives and students said that this will continue after they leave St Bernard's. God plays an active part in their lives.

Students spoke with enthusiasm about Chaplaincy activities, especially the annual year group retreats and indeed a Whole School Retreat on Ash Wednesday in which large numbers of Sixth form students led activities. Every effort is made to include as many pupils as possible in liturgies. The local parish priest, who is a governor, is a regular visitor who makes a much appreciated contribution to school life. Chaplaincy is highly valued by pupils and the Chaplain, in addition to the formal role, gives one to one support to individuals when needed. Students regularly lead or play an integral role in assemblies.

The students enjoy their work and rise to the challenges of the RE curriculum. They sustain their concentration over the hour long periods helped by the variety of activities in the lessons. A small amount of low level disruption (chatter) was observed; it should however be noted that the temperature at the time was over 30°C! Achievement in Religious Education is outstanding. RAISE Online analysis indicates that the GCSE results for the school are in the top 15% nationally for progress and the performance of RE is particularly strong in terms of the proportion of top grades (69% A\*/A in 2016). At A Level, the results for the school are impressive; the RE results are stronger still and fall within the top 25% of all schools for progress (ALPS). The RE results outperform the school average in terms of the proportion of top grades (79% A\*-B). ALIS analysis of last year's results indicated that the cohort of 29 exceeded expectations based on their very strong GCSE results by an average value-added of half a grade.

## **Leaders and Managers**

## **Grade 1**

The school's leadership is deeply committed to the Church's mission in education. The school makes great efforts to be faithful to the tradition of the Bernadine Sisters with prayer being central to their vocation as teachers. All members of staff are encouraged to be leaders and a culture of high expectation, praise and achievement is clearly in place. The Head knows his staff very well and brings the best out of them creating a strong team spirit. There is a clear intention to build on the excellence which already exists in the school, reflected in the rigorously detailed school improvement plan. As a result pupils have an innate understanding of the school's mission, share its purpose and are keenly and actively involved in shaping and supporting it. Each pupil completes an annual Headmaster's survey to feed into the evaluation of school life. The Head of RE and Chaplain meet weekly with the Head, to discuss all aspects of the school's spiritual life.

The provision for Religious Education is rigorously evaluated especially concentrating on the key areas of teaching quality and marking; this leads to well targeted planning and actions so

achievement in Religious Education for most pupils is exceptionally high. Through focused performance management, which includes formal and informal lesson observation, book scrutiny, staff are supported to give of their best and they in turn do the same for their pupils. A dynamic innovative Head of RE leads a very committed team by example. Leaders respond swiftly and intervene appropriately should the need arise - there was one instance of challenging behaviour which was dealt with appropriately following the school policy; such behaviour is very rare at St Bernard's. The outstanding exam results are aided by targeted mentoring supporting students who are at risk of missing their potential grades.

There is an effective Governing Body whose members are well deployed in its committees which fulfil its statutory and canonical duties. Minutes of meetings showed appropriate questioning of the Head and senior staff. Governors are actively involved in setting priorities for improvement and monitoring and evaluating their impact; this includes a biannual review of chaplaincy. Governors know their school and engage with parents, staff and students. RE is very well supported having the local Parish Priest as its Link Governor.

St Bernard's is a Catholic school with 26% from other faiths. Many different nationalities are represented and this diversity is welcomed; pupils' friendship groups showed integration of different ethnic backgrounds. Other faiths and cultures are celebrated. There is a well-developed Community Service programme including visiting local care homes and working in charity shops; students and teachers visit local primary schools to run lessons and workshops. There are strong links with other Catholic schools in the deanery. Human rights are promoted through citizenship activities which teach skills for participating in society through activities such as Mock Trials. The 2017 Whole School Retreat was focused on how each student can change the world. The Lampedusa cross evoked an empathetic response in students to the challenges faced by migrants. Impressive numbers have been involved in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award over many years, up to and including Gold Award - the service element stimulates service in local communities. There are a lot of student-led charity initiatives including support for CAFOD, Fair Trade and cards to prisoners of conscience and the Christmas Shoe-box appeal.

### **Provision**

### **Grade 1**

Liturgies, including Masses and Services of Reconciliation are well planned with themes appropriate to the season and stage of school life of the pupils; there are well-attended voluntary Masses on Thursdays. Pupil involvement is maximised including the mass preparation, readers, servers, Eucharistic Ministers, drama and vibrant music. Liturgies enrich the spiritual life of the whole school community. Spiritual and personal growth is supported by the annual Year Group retreats and indeed retreats for staff helping them reflect on their own faith journey. A daily prayer blog enriches the community, especially form prayers. The school was temporarily without a Lay Chaplain for half a term at the time of the inspection - the Head and Governors are very committed to Chaplaincy and plans are in place to appoint a full time Chaplain for September. The out-going Chaplain, who had a meeting with the Lead Inspector prior to the inspection, has left comprehensive notes for the new incumbent.

Some outstanding lessons were observed whose creative teaching enabled swift progress. In the best lessons, there is good variety of activity and students of differing ability can make their contribution at a level right for them. The quality of planning is very high with good awareness of pupils' capabilities. Subject knowledge is strong which motivates and enthuses the pupils. The department is very well resourced and has good ICT facilities. Lessons typically have a short question and answer session before the end which is very helpful for consolidating understanding.

The Religious Education curriculum is challenging, providing pupils with a deep insight into the Catholic Faith. The department have developed their own KS3 course which includes a study of Mark's Gospel from the old GCSE course. Other World Faiths are studied in detail - this is greatly enhanced by renowned outside speakers and three non-RE staff, a practising Muslim, Sikh and Jew, who volunteer to speak to students about their faith. There is an outstanding interactive Sixth Form General RE provision, which the students find very interesting and helpful to their personal development. Valuable extra-curricular opportunities include faith sharing groups and the

flourishing One World Group, Displays on classroom walls enhance and support learning. The quality and quantity of RE curriculum time meet the Bishop's Conference requirements; there is excellent provision.

St Bernard's has a rigorous tracking system which is well used to identify whether pupils' progress is in line with the school's high expectations; remedial strategies are employed when necessary. Pupils are consistently involved in setting their own targets - the marking at KS3&4 uses the new 1-9 GCSE grades for assessing from Year 7. There was evidence of pupils' awareness of their level in their books. The high progress scores evidence the effectiveness of assessment in Religious Education.