

Whalton CE Aided First School

Whalton
Morpeth
Northumberland
NE61 3XH

Diocese: Newcastle

Local authority: Northumberland
Dates of inspection: 8 March 2013
Date of last inspection: 1 November 2006
School's unique reference number: 122302 / 9293560
Headteacher: Mrs Susan Hall
Inspector's name and number: Mr Brian Hedley 619

School context

This is a small 48 pupil rural First School serving the village of Whalton and the surrounding area. Since the last inspection it has entered into a hard federation with Longhorsley Aided First School situated about twelve miles away. It shares its Governing Body and Headteacher.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of Whalton Aided First School as a Church of England school are outstanding

This is a happy, high-achieving school. Its commitment to human flourishing is unremitting. Christian values form the bedrock upon which everything is built. Its innovative curriculum has a powerful impact on pupils' lives; it enables them to be the best that they can be.

Established strengths

- The school is superbly led and managed; it is constantly improving
- Teaching is outstanding across the school; pupils make excellent progress
- A very capable staff team complement one another's skills magnificently
- Core values are not merely words; they are lived out day by day and enrich the lives of all
- Worship, including child-led worship, is inspirational and meaningful
- Assessment of progress in RE is robust and captures impact as well as knowledge

Focus for development

- As part of their own spiritual development, help adults to reflect upon, articulate and celebrate the unique contribution they make personally to the team

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

This is an outstanding Church school. Children make excellent progress because teachers are fastidious in assessing their changing needs and adapt learning and care in a way that ensures success for everyone. The staff are proud custodians of the school's excellent curriculum which is constantly reviewed and contributes strongly to the outstanding opportunities offered to the children and adults. Children say their school is 'happy, bright and joyful.' They confirm that lessons are 'challenging but always fun.' Pupils' outstanding spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is supported marvellously well. They readily explained how they are invited to live out Christian values day by day. Evidence of this reality can be found in excellent behaviour which makes a positive contribution to learning and relationships. Parents and carers thoroughly appreciate the partnership they have with the school and say that, 'we are valued for what we bring; school never finds it difficult to get our involvement; it's always a pleasure for us'. The school's strong Christian ethos spills out into the community superbly well; parents explained that children 'don't come out of the school gate and forget what they have learned; it carries on into the home'. The environment both inside and outside is awash with examples of core values 'in action'; this is a school where ethos runs as a 'golden thread' through every aspect of its work.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

Collective worship is scrupulously planned and well-attuned to the needs of learners. It is closely linked to the Church's Year and the school's core values, but also embraces events and occasions that might crop up unexpectedly. Worship openly places God at the centre of daily life and enables the whole school to explore questions, encounter a faith which is alive, and experience joy. The quality of child-led worship on inspection day by Y4 children was exceptional. They had chosen the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand and had prepared everything from the scripts, props, costumes, prayers and songs (We are One), and had even enlisted the help of a Y1 boy who was asked to share his 'packed lunch' of five loaves and two fish with everyone present. An indication of Y4's commitment and sense of responsibility to get things right is exemplified by the use of Skype at home to practise! When discussing worship, pupils said that it was a very important part of each day because 'we ask questions about what we have heard about, like this morning when we kept saying, "I wonder", to make everyone think. Children spoke warmly about the opportunity to lead worship 'because you do it for God, the whole school and the families as well sometimes'. A rather telling moment came at the end of worship when, as is normal, the Headteacher asked if there was anyone who would like to offer their own prayer. A Y3 girl prayed, 'Thank you God for those who were brave enough to tell us worship today. Amen.'

In the afternoon, parents and community members joined the children for 'Coffee and Catch up'. This special 'open house' occasion was attended by over fifty visitors. Children were able to show their work through presentations, readings and video. This flowed seamlessly into afternoon worship and home time prayers. Collective worship at Whalton gathers school and community together not only to celebrate, but to think, share, listen and reflect.

The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding

Inspirational, energetic teaching keeps learning interesting and fun. High levels of engagement, good listening and speaking skills and use of pupils' interests and prior knowledge leads to high quality work. Children are encouraged to make decisions and choices to guide their own learning and decide their viewpoint. Planning is meticulous and incorporates a range of opportunities for learners to apply skills across other areas of the curriculum. The subject is not 'stand alone', because teachers have the confidence and ability to explore themes and active learning at a brisk pace in reaction to pupil response. They draw children in to a deeper exploration of ideas, taking the thinking and learning on and relating it to everyday life. This is not a school that simply invites children to write stories about religious beliefs and practice. Rather, it links RE themes to core values, worship and PSHCE, so creating an osmosis which results in a community which truly lives out its faith.

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

The creation of a hard federation with Longhorsley Aided First School has been of benefit to both communities. A joint Governing Body, the sharing of resources and teacher expertise between both schools are some of the advantages. However, both schools rightly retain their own identity and are a strong presence in their own village. At Whalton, the vision and inspirational leadership of the headteacher together with the wholehearted commitment of every member of the staff team and governors, motivates a constant drive for excellence. High achieving children are not taken for granted. Adults are passionate about learning; this translates into their skilful development and delivery of an outstanding curriculum. The governing body and staff make excellent links with parents and carers who confirm how well their children are taught and cared for. There is an exceptionally high level of trust between all stakeholders. One parent said that, 'we couldn't get a better standard of education for our children, even if we paid for it.' The future of Whalton First School is in good hands; everyone strives to make the most of every moment, and their commitment to human flourishing at all levels is unrelenting.