

St Mark's West Essex Catholic Secondary School

URN: 137058

Catholic Schools Inspectorate report on behalf of the Bishop of Brentwood

30 April–01 May 2025

Summary of key findings

Overall effectiveness

The overall quality of Catholic education provided by the school

Catholic life and mission (p.3)

How faithfully the school responds to the call to live as a Catholic community at the service of the Church's educational mission

1

Religious education (p.5)

The quality of curriculum religious education

2

Collective worship (p.7)

The quality and range of liturgy and prayer provided by the school

2

The school is fully compliant with the general norms for religious education laid down by the Bishops' Conference

Yes

The school is fully compliant with any additional requirements of the diocesan bishop

Yes

The school has responded to the areas for improvement from the last inspection

Fully

2

Compliance statement

- The school fully complies with the general religious education norms laid down by the Bishops' Conference
- The school is fully compliant with the additional requirements of the diocesan bishop, regarding its choice of GCSE specification
- The school has fully addressed all previous areas for improvement

What the school does well

- The provision of two weekly Masses highlights the strong link between the school and the local parish.
- Students feel valued and well supported, and the sense of community is reflected throughout the school.
- The behaviour of students is outstanding, showing politeness and courtesy towards all.
- Leaders, including governors, are ambitious for the school and work hard to ensure its Catholic identity is strengthened and preserved.
- The Justice and Peace group, Christian Union and the liturgy representatives are wonderful role models and excellent ambassadors for the school.

What the school needs to improve

- Ensure that the Core religious education programme is taught weekly as a discrete subject on the curriculum timetable.
- Transform the 'Religious Life of the School' statement into separate policies for religious education and collective worship.
- Offer a variety of types of prayer so that students can experience the breadth of Catholic spirituality.

Catholic life and mission

How faithfully the school responds to the call to live as a Catholic community at the service of the Church's educational mission.

Catholic life and mission key judgement grade

Pupil outcomes

The extent to which pupils contribute to and benefit from the Catholic life and mission of the school

Provision

The quality of provision for the Catholic life and mission of the school

Leadership

How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for the Catholic life and mission of the school



St Mark's is an inclusive school where all are made to feel welcome. Students understand and acknowledge the distinctive Catholic nature of the school. New students are delighted to be part of St Mark's and spoke positively about their experience. One summed it up perfectly saying, "We feel known and cared for here". Students feel valued and have excellent relationships with each other and staff. The Justice and Peace group take a leading role in fulfilling the principles of Catholic social teaching, raising funds for a diverse set of organisations including the Christmas box appeal, collections for Harlow foodbank and a sponsored sleep-out which raised almost £900 for St Vincent's homeless shelter in Southend. Students can express that they are made in the likeness of God and demonstrate a deep respect for those of other faiths as expressed by a student, "I feel we are united here just like a family". They also embrace their personal responsibility to the environment through their stewardship work, growing vegetables onsite and selling them to raise funds for local charities. The chaplaincy provision is valued by students and a substantial number willingly take leadership roles as part of the liturgy group. A student commented, "When I go to Mass and listen to the word of God, I feel happier, and this role gives me the opportunity to spread the Gospel".

The school's mission is lived out by the care, kindness and compassion shown by students and staff towards each other. Staff are fully supportive of everything the school does, and they feel privileged to work here. They fully take on board the Catholic ethos of the school and go out of their way to help the students. A teacher commented, "With students like ours, you want to do extra activities for them". There is a tangible sense of community and belonging to a family. A parent reiterated this saying, "My children have thrived at this school, and I believe it is due to the strong family feel and Catholic ethos". St Mark's goes the extra mile to understand the needs

of all students. Pastoral care is outstanding; relationships between staff and students are strong. The additional learning needs of students is well supported, and the school's literacy programme enables students to quickly reach their expected reading age. The provision of RSHE meets both statutory and diocesan requirements and is overseen and managed by a dedicated staff leader.

Leaders, including governors, are true guardians of the Catholic life and mission at St Mark's. They have a shared passion and strategic vision which is coming to fruition with a significant increase in the number of prospective Catholic students electing to attend St Mark's. During the school inspection governors were busy interviewing and welcoming students and their families so that they would be fully inducted into the Catholic life of the school when they start in September. A parent noted, "I like the values my child is taught at the school. I like the way they practise what they preach". Leaders, including governors, witness to the Gospel values and Catholic social teaching in their direction of the school. They put their faith into practice by subsidising student meals, supporting the breakfast club and assisting some families with the cost of the school uniform. They demonstrate respect for the dignity of workers and an explicit commitment to both the physical and mental well-being of staff. This was confirmed by a member of staff who stated, "The headteacher demonstrates a genuine interest and duty of care to his staff". Greater engagement with the diocese in recent years has led to an increase in professional development. Consequently, staff have a good understanding of the school's mission and how it can be fulfilled.

Religious education

The quality of curriculum religious education

Religious education key judgement grade

Pupil outcomes

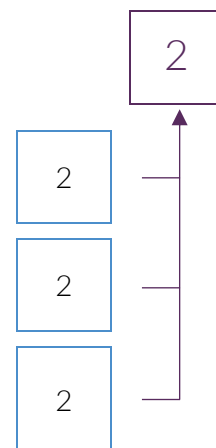
How well pupils achieve and enjoy their learning in religious education

Provision

The quality of teaching, learning, and assessment in religious education

Leadership

How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for religious education



Students make good progress when measured against the curriculum for each year. The focus is on students knowing more and remembering more which are reinforced through many opportunities for knowledge retrieval. Consequently, students can do more and have an understanding of what they are achieving in religious education. GCSE outcomes are near the national average in terms of standard and strong passes. In comparison to the school's core subjects, the standard pass rate is slightly below while the strong pass rate is well above. Students enjoy their religious education lessons and work with enthusiasm at all times. They produce good work which is well presented and are religiously literate, speaking confidently using key concepts and subject specific knowledge. This view was supported by a parent who said, "My child has been so well taught, helped and encouraged in religious education that she is now planning to study the subject at university so that she can one day return to St Mark's to teach in the school". Unsurprisingly, behaviour for learning was outstanding and students were fully engaged in all lessons observed. Books are regularly marked but not all students have a good understanding of how well they are doing. Feedback is not always precise enough for students to know how to improve their work. Teachers' comments need to inform students of the next steps in their learning.

Teachers have excellent subject knowledge and use it effectively to engage students, particularly at A level. Their expectations are high, and they are committed to the value of religious education which they effectively communicate to students. Praise and encouragement are evident in lessons, positive relationships support trust between students and staff, and participation in lessons. Retrieval tasks and questioning at the beginning of lessons are effective in enabling students to remember more but occasionally this is at the expense of the pace of learning for the rest of the lesson. Examples of outstanding practice included a focus on D-style questions

and responses in preparation for their GCSE examinations. The mocks highlighted a weakness in the responses and development of analytical and evaluation techniques which have become a focus for the department. Students conducted peer assessment, pair-and-share and teamwork before completing a timed response which they assessed using a mark sheet. In another lesson students used questions prepared for homework to quiz each other in an excellent example of kinaesthetic learning.

Leaders, including governors, have ensured that the school curriculum for religious education is on course to deliver the full Key Stage 3 *directory* in September. The department is well resourced and receives a generous capitation which reflects the status of the subject. It has parity with the other core subjects in relation to resourcing, staffing and accommodation. Leaders and governors have always promoted and supported the teaching of A level religious education, even when the take up has been low, and are now reaping the benefits of this with increased numbers in years 12 and 13 and improving A level results. Core religious education in the sixth form has 5% teaching time but now needs to be delivered weekly as a discrete subject on the curriculum timetable. The subject leader has an inspiring vision for religious education and has the expertise required to secure this vision. The department collaborates closely with the chaplain and other department leaders to promote Catholic social teaching across the curriculum. School-based training on teaching and learning has helped staff to plan more effectively for learning to take place. The use of analysis has helped the department to improve target grades and raise staff and student awareness of current performance. Leaders, including governors, must ensure that the statement on the religious life of the school is developed to form a separate governors' policy for religious education.

Collective worship

The quality and range of liturgy and prayer provided by the school

Collective worship key judgement grade

Pupil outcomes

How well pupils participate in and respond to the school's collective worship

1

Provision

The quality of collective worship provided by the school

2

Leadership

How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for collective worship

2

2

Students respond well to the experience of prayer and liturgy provided by the school, reflecting in silence and joining in prayer. They experience a range of ways to worship that complement the liturgical calendar including penitential services during Advent and Lent, a carol service at Christmas, Stations of the Cross before Easter and an invitation to say the Rosary in May. Masses for holy days of obligation are invitational, and the student response has been encouraging. Other Masses include the feast of St Mark and the Welcome Mass for the new Year 7 and parents. The parish priest celebrates a voluntary Mass before school every Friday for students and staff. He also provides a weekly Mass so that every form can celebrate the Eucharist with their tutor during the year. There is a vibrant liturgy team who meet regularly with the chaplain to organise the weekly themes and prayers for form time prayer and liturgy. Tutor groups create and lead prayer in their respective year assemblies each week. They are assisted by their form tutor, the chaplain and religious education department. Students now need to formally self-evaluate their presentations so that they can see what went well and what could be improved. The importance of being part of a faith community became apparent to all at St Mark's when tragedy struck recently. A parent commented, "The school recently had to process the unexpected death of a young student... I was impressed by the school's handling of such a tragic and sad event and the comfort it provided to the wider community as well".

Relevant staff skilfully and carefully selects scripture to ensure inclusivity and accessibility for all students. Staff are role models in leading prayer and facilitating opportunities for students to encounter Christ. Both students and staff appreciate the chaplaincy support they receive throughout the year. An example of this was the slide for Mary and the month of May, including an image of Mary and prayers. However, the school now needs to broaden the selection of prayer styles to include, for example: prayer requests; spontaneous prayer; meditation;

reflective images and quotes; thought-provoking readings; Taizé music; traditional prayers. The school is developing the use of music in prayer and liturgy in a way that enhances the experience for participants and reflects the richness of the Church's traditions. The centrality and accessibility of the chapel is crucial to the continued development of worship at St Mark's. Attention is given to ensure the chapel is well cared for and conducive to prayer. A room is also made available during Ramadan for Muslim students to pray. There is a special commissioning service every year for sixth form prefects. They also lead annual retreat days at the local Catholic primary schools. These are well received and fulfil a key aspect of the transition process. St Mark's should now explore opportunities to provide its own retreat days, utilising the skills of sixth formers.

Leaders, including governors, have faithfully ensured that prayer and liturgy remains a priority when setting budgets and allocating resources. Loving attention has been given to the school's Catholic character and this is reflected in the range and quality of the displays around the school which support the prayer life of the community, including artistic presentations of the Jubilee Year of Hope, a liturgical calendar which makes links with the diocese and the local deanery of churches and a display promoting Mary and the month of May along with an explanation of the significance of the Rosary. Leaders ensure that the links between the school and the local parishes remain strong by supporting students who are making the Sacrament of Confirmation and being present to congratulate them on their full initiation into the Church. The close bond with the parishes is further strengthened by the presence of an ordained deacon as a part-time teacher in the school as well as the weekly visits by the parish priest. The school has a statement of the religious life of the school which includes aspects of prayer and liturgy. However, the statement needs to be split into separate documents for collective worship and religious education so that they have the same status as other school policies.

Information about the school

Full name of school	St Mark's West Essex Catholic Secondary School
School unique reference number (URN)	137058
School DfE Number (LAESTAB)	8815458
Full postal address of the school	St Mark's West Essex Catholic Secondary School, Tipton Road, Harlow, CM18 6AA
School phone number	01279421267
Headteacher	John Taylor
Chair of governors	Stephen Gleeson
School Website	http://www.st-marks.essex.sch.uk/
Trusteeship	Diocesan
Multi-academy trust or company (if applicable)	St Mark's West Essex Catholic School
Phase	Secondary
Type of school	Academy
Admissions policy	Non-selective
Age-range of pupils	11-18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Date of last denominational inspection	November 2018
Previous denominational inspection grade	1

The inspection team

Dermot O'Neill	Lead
Josephine Erokwu	Team
Bernie Woodcock	Team

Key to grade judgements

Grade	England	Wales
1	Outstanding	Excellent
2	Good	Good
3	Requires improvement	Adequate and requires improvement
4	Inadequate	Unsatisfactory and in need of urgent improvement