



## DIOCESE OF BRENTWOOD

### Denominational (S48) Inspection Report

**Name of School:** St Philomena's School

**Local Authority:** Essex

**Inspection Date:** 30 March 2022

**Reporting Inspector:** Damian Fox

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

**Type of School:** Primary  
**School Category:** Independent  
**Age range of pupils:** 4-11  
**Gender of pupils:** Mixed  
**Number on roll:** 121  
**Appropriate Authority:** The Governing Body  
**Date of previous inspection:** 2 December 2015

**School Address:** 53 Hadleigh Road  
Frinton-on-Sea  
Essex  
CO13 9HQ  
**Tel. No.** 01255 674492  
**Headteacher:** Mrs Philippa Matthews  
**Chair of Governors:** Mrs Josephine Geldard

St Philomena's Catholic School is a small, independent day school for pupils aged 4-11. It is situated in Frinton-on-Sea, Essex. It is in the Diocese of Brentwood. It is a charitable trust run by a board of Parent Governors, although there are strong links with the school's founders, the Sisters of Mercy. They are represented on the governing body. There are 121 pupils on roll. A small minority are from other faith backgrounds. Pupils come from the Tendring Peninsula which includes the parishes of Sacred Heart and St Francis, Frinton-on-Sea and Our Lady of Light and St Osyth, Clacton-on-Sea. The attainment of students on entry is above average. The overall proportion of students who are baptised Catholic is 21%. A further 32% of pupils are from other Christian traditions. There is a small minority from another faith background. 18 pupils are on the SEND register covering all categories of need. 84% of pupils identify themselves as white British background. The remaining pupils identify as being from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds within the school.

### **Key grades for inspection**

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

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

**Grade 1**

St Philomena's is an outstanding Catholic school because the mission and ethos of Catholic Education underpins all that the school does. It is a school "inspired by the love of Jesus". This is manifest in the wonderfully warm and welcoming atmosphere in which everyone feels valued. There is a sense of belonging in a community that enthusiastically lives its faith. Each member of the community knows they can strive for excellence, confident that they will be supported and cherished. Leadership is highly effective at all levels. Governors and the headteacher form a strong team of experienced and deeply spiritual leaders. They demonstrate a distinct understanding of their role in providing a Catholic education and a passion to enable pupils to realise their full potential as God's children. Pupils display great pride in the school. By their words and exemplary behaviour, they show their commitment to and care for each other. Pupils are deeply aware of the needs of others in the wider community. Their response reflects a genuine understanding of their role in the Church's mission to the weak and vulnerable. Prayer and worship are central to the school's ethos and feature prominently in the daily life of the school, supported enthusiastically by staff and pupils. All acts of worship are greatly enhanced by singing, which is a significant strength of the school. Parents are welcome as partners in the mission of the school. They appreciate the impact of the school on the well-being of their children. Determined leadership from the headteacher ensures Religious Education is given the highest priority. It is regarded as central to the life of the school. Outcomes in RE are improving as a result of outstanding subject leadership and developing classroom practice. Detailed plans are in place to ensure all pupils achieve at least age-related expectations.

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

Develop the use of questioning in Religious Education to explore and deepen understanding for all pupils, particularly with regard to higher attaining pupils.

Continue to organise retreats and other spiritual experiences for pupils across the school.

Pupils derive huge benefit from attending St Philomena's, where upholding and respecting the dignity of each person is at the heart of school life. Pupils are rightly proud of their school and have a deep sense of belonging. They flourish in an atmosphere where each one is valued and expected to contribute to the welfare of others. Pupils were overwhelmingly positive about being part of a family where everyone is valued, respected and cared for and where there was a real sense of belonging. As a result of strong pastoral care, the behaviour of the pupils is exemplary, whether in lessons, around the school or in the playground. They respond positively to very high expectations of all staff who are excellent role models to the pupils. Relationships between pupils and staff are excellent and are based on mutual respect and a belief that they are there to serve rather than be served. Mature and respectful behaviour makes a significant contribution to the learning environment and the strong Catholic ethos that permeates the school. Pupils value the dedication and commitment of all staff. They feel teachers and support staff 'go the extra mile' to care for and support them. They understand and speak warmly of the mission and values of the school. They understand the school mission to 'grow and learn together in an environment where care and respect are shown to everyone'. They said the school motto is lived by all and that love and respect permeated every aspect of school life. Pupils are given many opportunities to take on responsibility and to help and serve others, for example, by becoming a prefect, a member of the school council, the environmental Green Team or an Energy Monitor. The school actively seeks their views and pupils have been invited to meetings with governors ensuring their voice is heard. Pupils are alert to the needs of others and are ready to support each other both in lessons and in the wider life of the school. They have a well-developed understanding of Catholic Social Teaching and respond well to those less fortunate. They have raised significant sums of money for good causes, including Mary's Meals and the local food bank. Parents were overwhelmingly positive about the school. As one parent wrote "There is a lovely community spirit throughout the whole school." Another parent wrote that the Catholic start helps them understand that "God is with them always." Students respond generously to a range of opportunities to serve others modelled on the example of Christ.

The school mission statement is a clear and inspiring expression of the educational mission of the Church. Inspired by the love of Jesus, the school celebrates the gifts of everyone "as we grow and learn together in a happy welcoming community." It captures the culture of this outstanding Catholic school, particularly in terms of the way in which the ministry of Christ is modelled by all staff. The school is distinctly Catholic. The range of religious icons and images on prominent display around the school reflects its mission. The impact of the mission statement is evident in the tangible sense of community at all levels. It is evident in the quality of relationships between staff, pupils and parents. The provision for the Catholic life of the school is a high priority. It is manifest in the way the mission of the school is lived out by all in this family focussed community. Pastoral care is a significant factor in developing wonderfully warm and harmonious relationships. The school's approach to behaviour management reflects Gospel values. It is clear that pupils are well supported in making the right choices and they understand personal responsibility.

The headteacher has a clear vision of what a Catholic school should provide for pupils. This is shared and fully supported by teachers. The headteacher is highly respected and valued by pupils, staff, governors and parents alike. She has a high profile around the school, cares deeply about the pupils and feels passionately that they are provided with the highest quality Catholic education.

Governors provide a powerful blend of challenge and support. They are highly experienced, fully committed and fiercely loyal to the school. They have all had children at the school hence the passion they have for developing a genuinely authentic Catholic school. They see "giving of our faith" as a fundamental part of their role. They fully understand the strengths and

weaknesses of the school and are not afraid to take decisions in the best interest of the pupils. In partnership with the headteacher, they have ensured that there was no academic or spiritual regression during lockdown. Consequently, life has continued as normal. Gospel values continue to affect the life and work of the community. Governors are regular visitors to the school for special events and Masses as well as visiting lessons. They have established two committees for finance and education which monitor and evaluate the impact of the school on the lives of children. The self-evaluation carried out by school leaders and governors prior to the inspection was fully endorsed by the inspector in all areas. In response to the last monitoring visit, leaders have put in place a detailed school development plan. It reflects their priority to sustain the Catholic life of the school. Outstanding leadership has ensured very high staff morale and all staff are fully committed to developing further the Catholic Life of the school.

Pupils enjoy RE and understand it is one of their most important lessons. There was unanimous affirmation during interviews and within the classroom that they appreciate the variety of activities teachers use to make learning fun, such as drama and interaction with peers. Pupils spoke positively and proudly about their learning. In all lessons, pupils approached learning with total commitment. There was a consistently high level of engagement throughout, both in answering questions and working independently. Pupils settled quickly to work. As a result, they created a positive environment with a quiet buzz of learning. In all lessons, from Reception, where pupils were happily creating Lenten images, to older pupils who displayed a good knowledge of Holy Week, it was evident that pupils wanted to engage and learn. Behaviour for learning is outstanding. In the lessons observed across the key stages, pupils were attentive, engaged actively and collaborated very well in their learning. Pupils displayed confidence in sharing their knowledge. For example, in one class, on returning from the Stations of the Cross in the parish church, all pupils were keen to offer answers. They felt secure in sharing, knowing they would be respected at all times. When challenged, pupils showed an ability to think more deeply about what they can learn from the Holy Week story. Although pupils were supported throughout online learning, school data shows that expected improvements in outcomes have not yet been realised. Overall, all pupils make good progress. Pupils' books showed that work is regularly marked and that teachers provide written comments on how to improve further.

Teaching is good overall. Teachers work very hard to ensure lessons meet the needs of all students. They have the capacity to deliver more outstanding teaching. As a result of high expectations of pupils and warm, respectful relationships in the class, pupils respond with commitment to learning and working quietly. Although pupils' subject knowledge and level of religious literacy are excellent, the use of questioning in some lessons could have been further developed to challenge them to think independently and, consequently, deepen their understanding of Holy Week and its lessons for us. Classrooms are well-equipped and have good displays that enhance the learning environment. There are excellent resources, including Bibles, a recommendation from the last full inspection. Assessment is undertaken in line with school policy and Diocesan guidelines. Teachers track progress through regular assessments. It identifies pupils' strengths and areas for further support.

Leadership of RE is outstanding at all levels. Leaders and governors have ensured that 10% of curriculum time across the school is allocated to RE as required by the Bishops' Conference. They have a clear understanding of the importance of RE in nurturing the faith of young people. Governors and headteacher form a strong partnership and together demonstrate total commitment to providing high quality teaching and resources to ensure pupils continually make progress in their knowledge and understanding of the faith. Governors are experienced. Through the Education committee, they are fully informed of the strengths in RE and how to improve further. The headteacher embodies the school's commitment to pupils. This was evidenced during interviews with governors and pupils. Her leadership constitutes confirmation that the promotion of RE goes beyond public rhetoric. Consequently, RE has a very high profile in the life of the school. The detailed and well thought out school development plan sets out the school's plans for improving outcomes.

Pupils' enthusiastic and reverential response to acts of worship is outstanding. In a school assembly, pupils' enjoyment and willingness to participate was both moving and inspiring. Reception children led an assembly on God's wonderful creation. Their excitement and delight were contagious. All pupils joined in unprompted, resulting in the whole community praying together in song. High quality singing, often accompanied by actions such as signing, reflects the central place of prayer and music in the spiritual life of the school. Pupils confirmed that prayer is a normal part of the daily routine of school life. They expect it and they appreciate the opportunities to participate. Pupils are clearly at ease when praying and act with integrity, irrespective of their faith background. The Head Boy and Head Girl lead prayers at the start of each whole school assembly. Each class leads at least one assembly or service a term which results in engaging topics that focus on Gospel values. Each day starts with a prayer and Collective Worship whether in the form class or in assembly. Pupils are keen to write and lead their own prayers.

Acts of worship provide pupils with opportunities to pray, reflect, sing and deepen their understanding of God's love and the importance of prayer in their lives. The school has re-introduced into the assembly rota a hymn practice to bring joy back into acts of worship. The provision of a wide range of experiences, liturgical and non-liturgical, helps pupils understand the value of prayer in creating a school and a world that cares for others. This is reflected in the tangible sense of prayerful harmony that permeates the lives of the community. Teachers ensure prayer is central to the life of the school. The school has begun to redevelop a post-lockdown programme of liturgical opportunities beyond the school. For example, Year 3 pupils visited the parish church to join with parishioners in the Stations of the Cross. The school benefits from the chaplaincy support from the parish priest who now provides school Masses in the parish. He visits the school regularly and offers effective spiritual support. Retreats for pupils have not yet restarted, but a planned programme will be in place for the summer term and next year. Parents are invited to class assemblies and members of the local parish, the Parish Priest and Sisters of Mercy are invited to join the school for events such as the Harvest Service, Mass at Christmas and Easter and the Year 6 Leavers' Service.

The effectiveness of leaders and governors is outstanding. They have a deep understanding of their role in ensuring the school is a prayerful, worshipping community. They have ensured that prayer and Collective Worship have remained at the heart of the school. Consequently, pupils have many opportunities to participate in high quality acts of worship. Leaders and governors monitor and evaluate provision on a regular basis through attendance at Masses, liturgies and assemblies. The chair of governors and headteacher are members of the local parish. The chair of governors attends assembly every week, attends school Masses and events, accompanies pupils attending church during the school day and meets with the headteacher to evaluate the provision for collective worship. The deputy head is a music specialist and holds a whole school hymn practice once a week. He is supported by a member of the governing body who has taught singing at St Philomena's for over 40 years. The school has a wonderful singing and music culture, with a school choir made up of pupils from Years 3 to 6. Other faiths and denominations are welcomed at the school and ministers invited in from other religious organisations such as the Church of England and the local Baptist church. Pupils in Years 5 and 6 undertake a 'Walk through the Bible' course, delivered by the local Frinton churches, in the Spring Term each year.