

Archdiocese of Cardiff

Inspection Report

Saint Mary's Catholic Primary School

Inspection dates	02-04 June 2009
Reporting Inspectors	Mrs. M.E. White Mrs. T. Walsh
Type of school	Primary
Age range of pupils	3-11
Number on roll	175
Appropriate Authority	Blaenau Gwent
Chair of Governors	Mr. T. Pritchard
School Address	Catholic Road Brynmawr Blaenau Gwent NP23 4EF
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Parish(es) served	St. Mary's Brynmawr St. Mary's Abertillery St. David's Llanhilleth
Date of previous inspection	February 2004
Headteacher	Mr. T. Baxter

Canonical Inspection under Canon 806 on behalf of the Archdiocese of Cardiff and
Inspection of denominational education under Section 50 of the Education Act
2005

Description of the School

Saint Mary's Catholic Primary School, situated in the centre of Brynmawr in the Ebbw Fach valley, serves the parishes of St. Mary's Brynmawr, St. Mary's Abertillery and the former parish of St David's Llanhilleth. The school is administered by Blaenau Gwent and functions under the trusteeship of the Archdiocese of Cardiff.

Saint Mary's caters for pupils between the ages of 3 and 11. At the time of inspection, 175 pupils are on roll. Currently 50 pupils are from other Christian denominations. Having suffered from many years of post industrial decline, the school's catchment area is now benefiting from improved road links and the construction of affordable housing. A significant number of pupils come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. 33% of the pupils are registered as being entitled to receive free school meals. There are 3 looked after children.

Pupils represent the full ability range, with a high proportion of pupils displaying poor communication skills on entry to school. 24% of the pupils are identified as having special educational needs, including 4 pupils with statements of special educational need. 94% of the pupils come from white ethnic backgrounds and there are 9 pupils for whom English is not their first language. No pupils come from Welsh speaking homes.

Due to a gradual growth in pupil numbers, the school was extended with temporary accommodation in 2003 followed by a permanent extension in 2009. Saint Mary's occupies a site shared with the parish church. The grounds include hard surfaced play areas, grassed areas, 2 well resourced outdoor classrooms, a mini beast garden, an infant play trail with a soft play area and a prayer and reflection area. The spacious building houses an administrative area, a small hall serviced by a kitchen and 8 large classrooms, linked by wide corridors, which provide additional working space for groups of pupils.

The school was last inspected in February 2004. Since then, significant changes include extensive building works, the appointment of a new parish priest in 2005 and new governing body membership. Staffing has increased from 4 teachers and 2 NNEBs to 10 teachers and 11 support staff. Of the 8 full time and 2 part time teachers, 8 are Catholic, 2 hold the *CCRS* and 1 is studying for it. Of the 11 learning support assistants, 2 are Catholic. All staff hold the *Cardiff Archdiocese Religious Education Certificate*. Saint Mary's achievements include *Basic Skills Award 2*, 3 leaves of the *Healthy Schools Scheme*, *ECO Schools Green Flag* and *Children's University Wales status*. The school is working towards *PESS* and *BECTA*.

Inspection grades

An overall judgement for each question is made using the following grades:

Grade 1: good with outstanding features

Grade 2: good features and no important shortcomings

Grade 3: good features outweigh shortcomings

Grade 4: some good features, but shortcomings in important areas

Grade 5: many important shortcomings

Table of grades awarded

Key question	Inspection grade
How effective and efficient is the provision of Catholic education in meeting the needs of learners and why?	2
1. How effective are leadership and management in developing the Catholic life of the school/college?	2
2. How good is the provision for prayer, collective worship and the liturgical life of the school/college?	2
3. How well do learners achieve in religious education?	2
4. How effective are teaching and learning in religious education?	2
5. How well does the religious education curriculum meet the needs and interests of learners?	1
6. How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners in religious education?	2

The diocesan reporting inspectors wish to express sincere thanks to governors, head teacher, staff, pupils and parents and also to the registered inspector and inspection team for the courtesy and co-operation received during the inspection.

Overall Effectiveness

How effective and efficient is the provision of Catholic education in meeting the needs of learners and why?

St. Mary's is a good Catholic school which provides outstanding care, support and guidance for its pupils. The headteacher and senior management team are faithful to living out the mission statement in running an equitable school, which values the contribution and diversity of all. The knowledgeable governing body discharges its responsibilities enthusiastically. The governors' outstanding contribution is evident in the transformation of the building and increase in pupil numbers. Together with the headteacher they are proud of their school, their staff and their pupils.

Communication with parents is good. They appreciate the school's open door policy, which gives them access to teachers at the beginning and end of the school day. Relationships throughout the school community are commendable, with a strong emphasis on teamwork amongst staff. All promote high standards of behaviour, evident both in work and at play.

Very effective working partnerships exist with the parish priest, who supports the Catholic life of the school and enhances pupils' knowledge and understanding of curriculum religious education. The school and parish work in harmony for the benefit of pupils and their families. Pupils play an active role in a number of interdenominational links with local churches and chapels and contribute to events and projects within the neighbourhood.

St. Mary's is committed to inclusion. Delivery of the curriculum to meet the range of needs among pupils, including those with special educational needs, additional learning needs and vulnerable pupils, is exceptional.

Worship is central to the life of the school. It underpins daily organisation and endorses the school's Catholic ethos and values. The celebration of Mass is seen as an integral part of worship. Acts of collective worship, opportunities for prayer, Masses, assemblies and classroom religious education contribute to the spiritual and moral development of pupils and impacts positively on relationships and behaviour.

Self-evaluation processes are established. The headteacher and religious education co-ordinator have a realistic understanding of the school's strengths and areas for further development. The well-informed link governor, who is also the parish priest, enhances the work of the school community. Standards of teaching observed during the inspection are good in all classes. Attainment across the school is generally good. Value added progress for the majority of pupils is good and they succeed regardless of their social, ethnic or linguistic background. As a community St. Mary's is seen to be, "Working, praying, sharing and learning together".

Improvement since the last inspection

The key issues identified in the previous inspection have been addressed.

- Assessment and levelling techniques based on Westminster exemplars were embedded and have now been replaced by the revised *NBRIA Levels of Attainment*.
- Self-evaluation in religious education was established using Archdiocesan documentation.
- Religious education resources and artefacts have been purchased, including resources for the teaching of other faiths.
- The Friends of St. Mary's parent teacher association, established in September 2004, has contributed to the school's redevelopment via summer projects.

Due to the commitment of the headteacher, parish priest and governing body the school has been transformed as follows:-

Outdoors

- land to the rear of the school purchased, grassed and fenced
- erection of nursery canopy and concrete floor with rubber safety flooring laid
- construction of outdoor nursery counting steps and sandpit
- outdoor tree seats constructed
- construction of infant play trail and soft play area
- provision of outdoor prayer/reflection/friendship area.

Indoors

A permanent extension and refurbishment of existing classrooms has resulted in spacious accommodation, which includes facilities for wheelchair users and a hearing loop system.

Development planning has resulted in:-

- the use of the mission statement as the school covenant
- religious education quality assurance processes
- a focus on promoting high standards
- the development of curriculum teams
- collaboration between the headteacher, religious education co-ordinator and link governor (the parish priest)
- a commitment to INSET
- the use of *NBRIA Levels of Attainment* to inform planning, assessment and pupil tracking
- the development of prayer
- a planned collective worship programme
- Rainbows clubs to support vulnerable pupils
- opportunities to consider care of God's world
- pupil involvement in school life
- a wider range of teaching strategies
- increasing use of ICT in worship and classroom religious education
- additional resources for religious education.

Capacity to improve

Plans for development include:-

- further development of the role of the religious education co-ordinator
- religious education target setting
- teachers to undertake the *CCRS*
- the development of the use of the outdoor prayer/reflection area
- the continued development of religious education in the foundation phase
- opportunities for pupils to be leaders of worship
- development of critical thinking skills and AFL in religious education
- re-appraisal of the use of *All That I Am*
- embedding the revised *NBRIA Levels of Attainment*

Leaders at all levels share a common vision and provide direction for the Catholic life of the school. The headteacher is dedicated to providing an inclusive community. Teachers are committed to the school's aims and support senior management. The school's self-evaluation report is realistic, accurately identifying strengths and areas for continued development. Resources have been targeted effectively, resulting in a transformed building. Governors are enthusiastic and fulfil all responsibilities. These factors have a positive influence, enabling the school to embed existing good practice and to develop further those areas indicated in this inspection and in its current action plan.

Grade: 2

What the school should do to improve further

- ❖ Implement the areas of development included in the self-evaluation report.
- ❖ Provide a greater range of opportunities to enable pupils to participate more fully in creative worship.
- ❖ Embed current initiatives linked to the revised *NBRIA Levels of Attainment*.

- ❖ Develop extended writing, including the range of writing genres.
- ❖ Further develop the use of ICT in religious education.
- ❖ Further develop class prayer foci.

THE CATHOLIC LIFE OF THE SCHOOL/COLLEGE

Leadership and Management

1. How effective are leadership and management in developing the Catholic life of the school/college?

Good features

Inspection findings agree with the school's judgement that the leadership and management of the Catholic life of the school are good with no important shortcomings. Leaders at all levels share a common vision and provide direction for the Catholic life of St. Mary's. Enthusiastic governors, the headteacher, religious education co-ordinator and the religious education link governor, who is also the parish priest, work hard to ensure that the school bears witness to the faith in all aspects of its life.

The school's covenant, "Working, praying, sharing and learning together," derived from the mission statement, informs the school's aims and values and underpins development planning. Together with the school logo, it is prominently displayed in all areas of the school and is included in all school documentation.

The headteacher and senior management team are faithful to living out the mission statement in running an equitable school, which values the contribution and diversity of all. The headteacher is committed to striving for the highest possible standards of achievement across all areas of the school's work. He actively leads and manages the school development plan, which involves the whole school community, to promote and develop the Catholic life of the school. Together with his governors and senior staff, he has created a climate conducive to effective teamwork. Knowledgeable governors understand the life of the school, its aims and aspirations and the needs of its pupils and their families. They are kept well-informed via headteacher reports, presentations, curriculum and class links, and attendance at school events and worship. They spend a considerable amount of time working with staff and pupils, which provides them with a snapshot of daily routines and standards achieved.

Governors contribute to the strategic direction of the school, analyse data, monitor development planning and manage the budget effectively to secure improvement. An outcome of their outstanding dedication and perseverance is evident in the growth in pupil numbers and a transformed school building. They are involved in self-evaluation processes and have a governing body development plan to improve their own effectiveness. Working in collaboration with staff and governors, the religious education co-ordinator has produced a realistic self-evaluation report which describes the school's strengths and indicates areas for further development. Religious education targets for action are included in the school development plan.

The religious education link governor, who is the parish priest, is a frequent and welcome visitor to the school. He plays a significant role in the life of the community. He meets regularly with the religious education co-ordinator and headteacher to discuss all elements of the Catholic life of the school, including the liturgical rota of celebrations, Friday Masses, sacramental preparation, baptisms and parish and community involvement. He recognises a great hunger and thirst for knowledge among pupils, both at Mass and in school. He commends the school staff and governors for wanting to provide all that they can for the pupils of St. Mary's. This relationship is a very good feature of the school.

Through their interaction with colleagues, parents and pupils, the headteacher, governors and senior management team fulfil their roles as faith leaders within the school. Governors and staff also undertake strategic roles within the parish community and are involved in catechesis. The headteacher provides the lead in creating an ethos of care and respect, where the individual is valued and nurtured. This is evident in the provision made for pupils with special educational needs and the support for vulnerable pupils through Rainbows clubs. Very good links exist with a number of external agencies, which reinforce the school's provision to guarantee its pupils' learning and general wellbeing.

Pupils, parents and visitors are made welcome in the school. It operates an open door policy for parents to voice anxieties or concerns. Parental returns via the pre-inspection questionnaire confirm that all parents are happy with the values and attitudes that the school fosters. They feel welcomed and are happy with the help and guidance their children are given. St. Mary's creates a distinctively Catholic ethos made explicit in the prominence of its school covenant, displays of pupils' work, classroom prayer foci and artefacts. Spiritual growth is nurtured through prayer, acts of collective worship, Friday Masses, assemblies and celebrations linked to the liturgical year.

Pupils are encouraged to develop independence, exercise responsibility and take an active part in the life of the school. Older pupils undertake monitoring duties, members of the school council run the fruit tuck shop, and the work of the ECO committee secured Green Flag status in May 2009. Through its charity work and ecumenical links in the local community, the school fosters respect, understanding and an appreciation of differences and highlights the importance of peace, fairness and stewardship of God's creation. Relationships throughout the school are commendable. Leaders promote high standards of behaviour, evident both in the classroom and at play. Internal day to day arrangements are well established.

Shortcomings

There are no shortcomings in important areas.

Grade: 2

Collective Worship

2. How good is the provision for prayer, collective worship and the liturgical life of the school/college?

Good features

The provision for prayer, collective worship and the liturgical life of the school is good with no important shortcomings and all statutory requirements are fulfilled. At St. Mary's, worship is central to the life of the school. It underpins daily organisation and is pivotal in creating an atmosphere of spiritual depth, where the presence of God is acknowledged and celebrated by all present and is fundamental to the school's Catholic character. Collective worship is seen as a special occasion, which offers opportunities for pupils to develop a sense of awe and wonder and enables individuals to reflect and respond in prayer. It is viewed as part of the whole school curriculum. It endorses the school's values and underpins its Catholic ethos, the equal opportunities policy and behaviour guidelines.

Collective worship takes a variety of forms – whole school, key stage and class based, through which all staff plan and lead worship. Depending on their age and ability, pupils contribute to the planning process. The lower school act of worship was lead completely by Year1 pupils. The theme was based on class work from the *Here I Am* topic 'Choices'. The leaders welcomed the gathering, read scripture confidently, talked about their pictures displaying good and bad choices, introduced the reflection on bad choices made, and lead prayers of thanks for good choices, and sorrow for bad choices. The leaders explained that the mission was to think about past actions and say sorry for bad choices made. Pupils listened attentively throughout, sang well and responded reverently.

The outstanding key stage 2 worship observed, linked the *Here I Am* topic choices to the remembrance of D Day. The focus table displayed memorabilia of Reg Adams, a former parishioner who was awarded the Military Cross for bravery during the D Day landings. Reg's choice to assume leadership of the men was told in a sympathetic manner. Haunting French lyrics accompanied ICT images of the trenches, troops, French villages, graveyards and surrender. Pupils read pages from Reg's notebook – the names and dates of his friends who fell on the beaches of Dunkirk. Pupils were asked to reflect on the choices made. ICT images of pupils at work and play demonstrated choices made in their own lives. After singing Reg's favourite hymn to Our Lady and reading the British Legion Prayer to the fallen, pupils were requested to research the D Day Landings and at bedtime remember Reg and the soldiers who had died. This was in order to perpetuate the memory of these events so that their sacrifice would not be forgotten. The impact was evident on the faces of all present, pupils and adults, who were moved by the sensitive telling of Reg's story. Later in the day, pupils were seen re-reading the prayer on display.

Class based worship is supported by a helpful planner, which identifies the main elements of liturgy. The collective worship policy provides teachers with best practice guidelines and practical advice to enable pupils to be active participants in worship. Good provision is made for prayer in a variety of ways across the curriculum. Prayers are said at relevant times of the day and are an integral part of collective worship. Pupils are encouraged to pray reflectively and spontaneously, using personal and traditional prayers of the Church. They have opportunities, through *Here I Am* topics, to compose their own prayers and from an early age they participate in the writing of bidding prayers for Mass. Prayer

regularly features in the plenary session of curriculum religious education. Each class has a prayer focus linked to the *Here I Am* topic or liturgical season. Pupils can place their prayers on the focus table, in prayer boxes, worry boxes or on leaves on a prayer tree.

During the months of May and October, Key Stage 2 pupils are invited to celebrate the mysteries of the Holy Rosary with the parish priest. Pupils at St. Mary's are encouraged to honour Our Lady with flowers and drawings and in so doing, learn to love her, talk to her and accept her quiet presence at their side. During Lent, Year 6 pupils and teachers are invited to participate in a voluntary Way of the Cross during lunchtimes. The headteacher leads staff in prayer at the beginning of staff meetings. Governors begin meetings with prayer. Pupils' liturgical formation is planned through a programme of whole school Masses, key stage Masses, acts of collective worship, paraliturgies, assemblies and dramatic presentations.

Parents and parishioners particularly enjoy the celebrations to mark Holy Week and Easter, and the Nativity. A good example was evidenced in the pre-inspection Palm Sunday Mass at St. Mary's Church. During the re-enactment of the Passion, pupils conducted themselves confidently. They read and spoke their parts with conviction. They moved carefully and reverently around the sanctuary. The crucifixion scene with accompanying sound effects was very effective, as was the scene when Jesus was laid gently in His mother's arms. All pupils created a sense of occasion. The parish priest addressed all the pupils by name. His open ended questioning in the homily enabled the pupils to demonstrate their knowledge about the events of Holy Week and express their feelings about them.

The celebration of the Mass is seen as an integral part of worship at St. Mary's. As the school shares a site with the church, Mass is celebrated each Friday, alternating with lower school and upper school pupils. The parish priest plans the Masses with the headteacher, religious education co-ordinator and class teachers. Pupils participate in the planning and undertake ministries appropriate to their age and understanding, including a number of altar servers. The parish priest describes the pupils as devotional and reverential in their enjoyment of the celebrations. Under the direction of the parish priest, the school prepares pupils for the sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Eucharist. First Holy Communion is a joyful school/parish celebration eagerly anticipated by the pupils.

The school seeks to improve the quality of worship. The headteacher evaluates his acts of collective worship and teachers evaluate classroom worship. The headteacher or religious education co-ordinator attend all liturgies to monitor and evaluate the quality of the celebration. Teachers have had access to Archdiocesan training and resources have been upgraded. The acts of collective worship and prayer make a good contribution to the spiritual and moral development of pupils and impacts positively on relationships and behaviour.

Shortcomings

Pupils have limited opportunities to participate fully in creative worship.
Some prayer areas lack focus.

Grade: 2

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Achievement and Standards

3. How well do learners achieve in religious education?

Good features

Pupils are admitted to St. Mary's with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences in religious education ranging from regular attendees at Mass to having little or no understanding. The shift in emphasis within this spectrum is improving due to the impact of the combined efforts of the headteacher and parish priest. Pupils at St. Mary's display the full ability range. However, many pupils on entry demonstrate ability below national expectations. Attainment for the vast majority of pupils is good and, for some of the more able pupils, very good.

In their first year at school, pupils make very good progress and by the time they leave Reception class their achievement is commensurate with attainment in the core subjects. Children at this phase are happy to be engaged in a range of activities both inside and in the outdoor classroom. The stimulating environment created in both classes provides a secure foundation for further progress.

Evidence drawn from the scrutiny of pupils' workbooks, class portfolios, topic books and assessments, confirms that the majority of pupils are gaining knowledge, skills and understanding in religious education throughout the year with sustained continuity and progression throughout the key stages. Outstanding support for pupils with special educational needs and additional learning needs enables these pupils to achieve their potential.

Assessment records demonstrate that value added progress for the majority of pupils at St. Mary's is good, and pupils succeed regardless of their social, ethnic or linguistic background. Standards compare favourably with those in the core subjects.

Following staff training on the revised *NBRIA Levels of Attainment*, coupled with the school's developments in critical thinking skills and AFL strategies, a new planning format has been implemented. Pupils' workbooks indicate that marking is sensitive and positive. Teachers have adopted a new marking policy to ensure that pupils are questioned in a way which encourages them to reach their potential. As a result of Archdiocesan training in assessment and in-house moderation, teachers are using the revised *NBRIA Levels of Attainment* to level *Here I Am* topics and award a 'best fit' level at the end of the year. Through the use of WALT and WILF, and AFL strategies, pupils are aware of the learning objective and are engaging in self-assessment activities. Older pupils demonstrate knowledge of success criteria, evaluate achievement and indicate areas for improvement. The emerging religious education portfolio contains samples of levelled, moderated work based on recent topics.

The standard of recorded work is generally good, with some very good examples produced by more able pupils. Written tasks across the whole school include the writing of simple prayers, copying, retell, narrative, question and answer, cloze

procedure, newspaper reports, leaflets, mind mapping, dialogue and scripture interpretation.

Behaviour in class is very good and often exemplary. Pupils display very good listening skills, work with increasing independence and remain on task. These standards of behaviour are maintained in the hall at breakfast club, at lunchtime and in the play areas. Pupils show respect for each other and adults and are mindful of the consequences of their actions.

Pupils' attitudes to learning in religious education are very good. They demonstrate sound understanding of the *Here I Am* topic 'Choices', making links with their own lives and experiences. They enjoy their activities, are enthusiastic and have positive relationships with their teachers and learning support assistants. St. Mary's offers pupils many opportunities, which enhance spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Spiritual development is promoted effectively in classroom religious education, acts of worship, Masses, assemblies and regular visits from the parish priest. Evidence indicates that pupils reflect on the teachings of Jesus and its impact on their lives.

Moral and social development is planned for. Pupils have opportunities to discuss issues which affect them. In their work on 'Choices' pupils of all ages demonstrate their understanding of right and wrong. They are able to give reasons for good and bad choices and suggest the best options to be taken. Both the school council and ECO committee are well established. They are involved in organising the fruit tuck shop, decision making, recycling and aspects of school improvement.

Most teachers make satisfactory use of the Welsh language throughout the day. Pupils are taught simple Welsh prayers and hymns. They celebrate the culture of Wales in their local environment, in visits to places of interest and in their annual school eisteddfod. Pupils are involved in the life of the parish, in ecumenical services, out of hours clubs and community work.

Pupils show respect for other cultures and diversity within their own school. They know about other faith practices based on *Here I Am* teaching and visits to the synagogue in Swansea. They demonstrate concern for others in their support of local and international charities raising funds for good causes.

Parents indicate that they chose St. Mary's for its good reputation, discipline, values, and close links with the church. They are happy with the standards their children achieve.

Shortcomings

Work doesn't consistently reflect a variety and range of writing genres.

Grade: 2

Quality of provision for religious education

4. How effective are teaching and learning in religious education?

Good features

Inspection findings agree that teaching and learning are good with no important shortcomings.

The teaching of religious education follows the recommended Archdiocesan programme *Here I Am*, thus fulfilling the requirements of the *Curriculum Directory for Catholic Schools*.

The quality of teaching observed is good with no important shortcomings in all classes. Teaching is most successful where planning is thorough and detailed, agreed teaching and learning strategies are implemented, a brisk pace is maintained, resources are well prepared, a purposeful learning climate is created, learning support assistants are used productively, Interesting and stimulating activities are planned to engage the interest of learners and clear learning objectives are shared with the class and evaluated in effective plenary sessions.

Teachers demonstrate good knowledge of the *Here I Am* topic 'Choices'. They employ open-ended questions to probe pupils' understanding of good and bad choices. Teachers and pupils identify the key skills to be used. Pupils demonstrated their understanding in practical work, role play, discussion, written activities and drawing.

In the foundation phase, including reception, teachers create a stimulating environment in which pupils thrive. Nursery children made a "locket" on a painted pasta necklace to make a classmate happy. Children chattered about their choice of friend as they threaded their pasta beads. Once completed, the necklaces were presented to the classmate and thanks were given. The children were eager to wear their necklaces and take them home. In their focussed activity, Reception children sorted pictures of youngsters making good and bad choices and were able to give good reasons for their decisions. They worked very well in pairs and maintained a brisk pace throughout.

At key stage 1, pupils recognised how their choices could affect others and offered suggestions of what they could do to show that they were sorry for their actions. Following the reading of Isaiah 58: 9-11, Year 2 pupils identified what God said about making good and bad choices. After exploring their feelings, they illustrated a good choice or wrote a prayer or a litany of thanks.

At lower key stage 2, pupils were engaged in role play. Class 3 pupils believed that choosing to be baptised is a good choice as you become a member of God's family and are cleansed of Adam and Eve's sin. They chose to re-enact a baptism at church with the parish priest in preparation for pupils' forthcoming baptism. Pupils talked about their choice of making their First Holy Communion so that they could receive Jesus. Class 4 pupils realised that making choices has consequences.

At upper key stage 2, pupils recognised and discussed the factors which made some choices difficult to make. In small groups they enthusiastically explored and presented scenarios such as bullying, misusing money, smoking and annoying a supply teacher. Pupils offered options for actions, reasons for their choices and described how they and others would feel if they made good or bad choices.

A common planning format has been established, enabling teachers to identify learning objectives, pupil activities, resources, key skills and assessment. During the inspection, activities were differentiated by task, outcome, questioning and adult support. Use is made of exemplar materials posted on the Archdiocesan website. Teachers mark work sensitively with positive comments. In the best examples of marking, teachers' comments refer to the learning outcome and indicate how to improve. Pupils' understanding is assessed throughout the lesson, using open-ended questioning. Pupils are involved in assessment in the use of WALT and WILF and AFL strategies. At the end of each topic, pupils are assessed using the revised *NBRIA Levels of Attainment*. An emerging portfolio of work from Spring 2009 exemplifies school moderated levels. Pupil tracking sheets demonstrate progress.

The headteacher and religious education co-ordinator monitor all aspects of curriculum religious education. Individual feedback is provided and whole school issues are addressed. Outcomes are fed into the school development plan.

St. Mary's has outstanding measures in place to identify and cater for pupils with special educational needs and additional learning needs. Support is provided in class and in withdrawal groups. Learning support assistants make a valued contribution to religious education lessons and contribute to learners' success. The religious education co-ordinator liaises with the SENCO and Rainbows leaders to ensure that the needs of vulnerable pupils are met.

Parents are kept informed about their children's learning in religious education through a termly topic newsletter, occasional homework tasks, termly progress meetings and an annual written report. They are invited to attend Masses and school events. Year 5/6 parents are consulted prior to the commencement of puberty/sex education lessons. A variety of family/parish courses in ICT, literacy and mathematics have been provided to help parents, guardians and parishioners. Parents are informed about Rainbows clubs which support the needs of vulnerable pupils.

The majority of parents believe that the school provides a clear understanding of what is taught in religious education, in personal and social education including sex education, and that they are kept well informed about their children's progress.

Shortcomings

Insufficient time is given to religious education activities in nursery and reception. ICT in religious education is underdeveloped.

Grade: 2

5. How well does the religious education curriculum meet the needs and interests of learners?

Good features

Inspection findings exceed the school's grade and consider that this area is good with outstanding features.

Curriculum provision at St. Mary's is generally good. It follows the recommended Archdiocesan programme *Here I Am* thus fulfilling the *Curriculum Directory for Catholic Schools*. Religious education accounts for 10% of overall teaching time. Planning and assessment processes have been reviewed to accommodate the revised *NBRIA Levels of Attainment*, the introduction of the foundation phase, the key skills framework, critical thinking skills and Assessment for Learning strategies. Good use is made of materials posted on the Archdiocesan website.

Teachers have access to prior learning and experiences through pupil records and planned transition arrangements. At the beginning of each academic year, a week of activities is planned to help settle pupils into new classes. During this period, pupils are involved in devising class rules, a set of behaviour and work ethic guidelines, which give pupils ownership and helps establish each class's unique ethos.

Delivery of the curriculum to meet the range of needs among pupils, including those with special educational needs, additional learning needs and vulnerable pupils, is an exceptional feature of St. Mary's school. At present, there are disabled pupils whose parents choose a faith based education for them. School governors are passionate advocates of inclusion and designed the new extension to meet this need.

The school currently has a high percentage of support staff, reflecting the number of pupils identified as needing extra support and the nature of disability of some pupils. Members of the support team are trained in sign language, autism and Reading Reflex. A number of external agencies provide specific support and advice. Services include Blaenau Gwent's educational psychology service, specific learning difficulties team, hearing impaired, occupational health, educational welfare officer, child protection team, looked after children's service, school nurse and Pen y Cwm outreach team. St. Mary's maintains close links with Blaenau Gwent's Social Services and Health Department. The school has been commended for providing full time nursery placements to benefit families with numerous social problems. Teachers have been recognised for their commitment, co-operation and willingness to achieve positive outcomes for children.

All staff have been trained in appropriate support for vulnerable pupils. Those pupils who have suffered from the trauma of bereavement or a family break up are invited to enrol in one of the Rainbows clubs. Nurturing is an outstanding feature of the school. The school clerk fulfils the role of first day response officer. She works closely with the headteacher to monitor attendance and punctuality.

St. Mary's has an increasing percentage of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds, many of whom come from homes where English is spoken as a

second language. The literacy curriculum team, class teachers and support staff have worked hard to support parents and guardians as well as pupils via a number of initiatives. The parish priest caters for their spiritual and social needs. The school recognises and respects diversity and social cohesion. This is achieved through equal opportunities in all areas of the curriculum and in the daily ethos of the community.

St. Mary's has a range of resources to deliver the *Here I Am* programme, including the teaching of other faiths. Teachers are beginning to use ICT to enhance the delivery of curriculum religious education and worship. Each class has a prayer focus with a variety of artefacts. Prayer boxes, a prayer tree and worry boxes offer opportunities for pupils to give thanks and express anxieties. Visitors and guest speakers are invited to share their experiences with pupils.

Prayer and reflection in the classroom, together with the planned programme of worship and Circle Time, enhance spiritual and moral development. Under the guidance of the parish priest, the school undertakes sacramental preparation for Reconciliation and Holy Eucharist. First Communion Day is a joyful school and parish celebration.

St. Mary's enjoys outstanding links with the parish, sharing a site with the parish church. The parish priest, who is the religious education link governor, is actively involved in the life of the school, visiting weekly to prepare Friday Masses. Pupils are eager altar servers. With staff, pupils help with the general upkeep of the church. They secured a substantial biodiversity grant to regenerate the church car park/junior playground, which was accomplished with parent and community labour and support. The school takes an active role in supporting community groups who use the church hall and often help with special services.

Pupils also play an active role in a number of interdenominational events with Brynmawr Ecumenical Group of Churches and they have strong links with all of the chapels in the town. They lead services such as the celebration of Christian Unity week. Being based within a varied community, St. Mary's makes every attempt to preserve pupils' roots. All classes contribute to local events and community projects. They have a longstanding link with the Plasgeler group of nursing homes and Brynmawr Pensioners' Luncheon Club, and where possible, perform extracts from plays and musicals.

To enhance the taught curriculum, an extensive programme of educational and fun visits is planned. Years 5 and 6 have the opportunity to participate in a 3 day residential outdoor pursuits course at Hilston Park. By using the support of Brynmawr historical society, museum, local radio station and other societies, the local environment and wider community enhances cultural and social awareness in the pupils. The school has forged effective partnerships with a number of training agencies and businesses, which support the life of the school.

Pupils at St. Mary's are offered many opportunities to develop independence, exercise responsibility and take an active part in the life of the school. They act as monitors and playground buddies, and draw up bullying and behaviour charters and act as councillors. Both the school council and ECO committee are well established. School councillors are effective in representing the views of their

fellow pupils. Each year, 2 are elected to serve on Blaenau Gwent's Children's Council where they are ambassadors for their school. As a result of the thriving ECO committee, the school has gained Green Flag status. Care and concern for people, the environment and global issues is demonstrated in their fundraising to support charities such as CAFOD, NSPCC and Tanzania Ambulances.

Extra curricular provision is outstanding. St. Mary's offers a breakfast club which ensures that pupils have a nourishing start to the school day. It also offers an extensive range of lunchtime and after school activities to pupils from Year 2 to Year 6. Many promote health and fitness for pupils. The school has earned 3 leaves of the Healthy School Scheme. Personal and social education is embedded throughout the curriculum. Good quality support is provided by the school nurse and Gwent Police Schools Liaison Team. Induction arrangements ensure that new pupils settle quickly into school routines. A programme of transition activities and visits ease the transfer to secondary education.

A whole school approach of praise and reward engenders a positive ethos. The weekly celebration assembly recognises and shares pupils' achievements in and out of school.

Shortcomings

There are no shortcomings in important areas.

Grade: 1

Leadership and management of religious education

6. How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners in religious education?

Good features

Inspection findings agree with the school's judgement that the leadership and management of religious education is good with no important shortcomings.

The headteacher, governors and senior staff share a common vision for St. Mary's and provide clear direction in subject policies. The religious education self-evaluation report demonstrates that the subject co-ordinator has a realistic understanding of the school's strengths and areas for further development. In conjunction with the headteacher, the co-ordinator is responsible for the religious education action plan. They evaluate progress against priorities at the end of the year. Regular reports on standards and developments are forwarded to governors. The religious education co-ordinator keeps abreast of initiatives and good practice by attendance at Archdiocesan meetings, INSET and through cluster work. She disseminates information and leads in-house training. She supports colleagues, especially newly qualified teachers and new members of staff and provides advice and guidance on curriculum matters.

The subject is organised efficiently. As a result of recent initiatives, planning and assessment procedures have been updated to accommodate the revised *NBR/IA Levels of Attainment*. The emerging school portfolio contains examples of

levelled, moderated work from the spring term. Self-evaluation processes are embedded. The headteacher and religious education co-ordinator use the self-evaluation toolkit to review and update the self-evaluation report annually with staff. Evidence of monitoring by the headteacher and religious education co-ordinator includes classroom observations, listening to learners, book scrutiny, overseeing planning and discussions with teachers. Feedback is provided to individuals and whole school issues are addressed.

Staff have access to Archdiocesan INSET and in-house training. One closure day per year is devoted to religious education. A reasonable sum from the INSET budget is allocated to religious education. Performance management is embedded for all staff. Objectives are set which support religious education and the Catholic life of the school. PPA time is effectively managed.

The school is committed to inclusion and all relevant policies are in place. The headteacher and religious education co-ordinator analyse data to compare attainment in religious education with other core subjects. From September 2008 targets were set for religious education.

Effective working partnerships exist with the parish priest who supports the Catholic life of the school and enhances pupils' knowledge and understanding of curriculum religious education. The school and parish work in harmony for the benefit of the pupils and their families.

Of the 8 full time teachers and 2 part time teachers, 8 are Catholic. 2 hold the *CCRS* and 1 is studying for it. Of the 10 learning support assistants, 2 are Catholic. 18 staff gained the *CAREC* this year.

Regular audits by the co-ordinator and class teachers ensure that appropriate resources are used to deliver the teaching of religious education. Teachers are beginning to use ICT in curriculum religious education and worship. Priorities in the action plan and recommendations for resources from the Archdiocese are supported by an annual budget allocation. The school building and grounds have been extensively extended and developed to a high standard to meet the needs of all pupils.

The committed and knowledgeable governing body discharge their responsibilities enthusiastically. Together with the headteacher, they are proud of their school, their staff and their pupils. As a team they are seen to be, "Working, praying, sharing and learning together".

Shortcomings

The use of ICT is underdeveloped.

There has been no opportunity for the religious education co-ordinator to undertake classroom observations.

The religious education portfolio is in early stages of development.

Grade: 2

The School's Response to the Inspection

The school would like to thank Mrs. M. E. White for leading the inspection at the school on the 2nd to 4th July 2009.

Staff and governors express their thanks to Mrs. M.E. White and Mrs. T. Walsh for working so hard during inspection week. They clearly recognised and acknowledged all of the work completed since the last inspection in 2004 and identified definite areas for further improvement.

The school are pleased that the inspectors found that the school has maintained its distinctly Catholic ethos throughout a recent period of expansion and is meeting the needs and interests of learners.

Staff are extremely pleased the inspectors highlighted their hard work and dedication to pupils.

An action plan has been developed and the school is confident that it can address the key areas for development highlighted in the report.

A copy of the school's action plan in response to the inspectors' key areas for development will be sent to all parents in due course.

The governors' annual report to parents will report on the progress made in the key areas for development.

Once again the school thanks Mrs. White for her hard work. Although inspection can be stressful, all staff have agreed that the friendliness and professionalism shown by both inspectors have made the experience worthwhile and will definitely make a good school even better.

Evidence Base for the Inspection

- The school's self-evaluation reports
- Religious education and other related policies
- Pre-inspection meetings with staff and governors
- Pre-inspection meeting with parents and completed questionnaires
- Discussions with the headteacher and religious education co-ordinator
- Discussion with the parish priest/religious education governor
- Lesson observations
- Scrutiny of planning and assessment
- Scrutiny of pupils' work
- Scrutiny of prayer foci and display
- Attendance at Palm Sunday Mass
- Attendance at acts of collective worship
- Discussions with pupils
- Observations with daily routines