



## National Society Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools Report

### **Bristol Cathedral Choir School**

College Square  
Bristol  
BS1 5TS

**Previous SIAMS grade:** Satisfactory

**Diocese:** Bristol

Local authority: N/A

Dates of inspection: 24 & 25 November 2014

Date of last inspection: October 2010

School's unique reference number: 135575

Principal: Neil Blundell

Inspector's name and number: Lyn Field 151

### **School context**

In September 2008 the school re-opened as an Academy, changing its status from that of an independent school. It is oversubscribed and has 778 students including 182 in the sixth form and 28 choristers, continuing its historic connection with the Cathedral. The school's main specialism is music and maths is its second. The principal is executive principal of the adjacent and newly established Bristol Cathedral Primary that shares the same governing body. The proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is above average whilst a lower proportion than usual are disadvantaged or have special educational needs.

### **The distinctiveness and effectiveness of Bristol Cathedral Choir School as a Church of England Academy are good**

- The Academy is relatively young as a faith school but with its first generation of students in their final year, its inclusive faith ethos is securely established.
- The commitment of leaders to the Faith Vision and Christian values of the school shape the excellent culture for teaching and learning and inform its future direction.
- The high profile given to religious education and philosophy (REP) results in the high standards of learning and personal development of students.
- Cathedral worship plays a key role in expressing the school's inclusive faith ethos.
- Student voice has an important and increasing role in strategic planning as a faith school.

### **Areas to improve**

- Establish an efficient and robust system for keeping track of the Academy's progress as a faith school in order to identify priorities for action on a regular basis
- Develop a model for the compulsory sixth form curriculum that gives due attention to spirituality and the place of faith in contemporary society
- Revise the model of chaplaincy in order to recognise the team approach that has evolved

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

This is an inclusive faith school that embraces students of all cultures and backgrounds. Although not all students find it easy to articulate the distinctively Christian teaching underpinning the core values, most recognise their impact and the influence of the school's Faith Vision on their positive attitudes to diversity. The core values of wisdom, fellowship, courtesy and compassion shape a culture for staff and students alike to work effectively. The values are consistently apparent in the systems for pastoral care, for example, vertical tutor groups, bereavement support and links with organisations such as the City Sanctuary. Relationships are excellent and students speak passionately of teachers 'going the extra mile' for them. Consequently, students are highly motivated to learn, behaviour is consistently good and exclusions are relatively few in number. Negotiated moves for students from other schools are frequently successful and attendance is above that of other secondary schools. Christian values, therefore, shape a context for learning in which students consistently achieve results well above the national average, especially at the highest levels. Formal arrangements for student voice have recently been re-established and this is already giving renewed impetus to the evaluation of the faith ethos. Student groups for faith, community and equalities are investigating issues in greater depth and with far more perception than is usually seen. Their early findings recognise the importance leaders place on wellbeing and community cohesion whilst identifying that more work is needed in raising awareness of the unintended implications of language used.

Religious education makes a positive contribution to the faith character of the school because students gain accurate knowledge and a grasp of religious language that enable them to make informed contributions to debates. They comment, for example, on how lessons have challenged their perceptions of prejudice-based bullying and media stereotyping. Reported incidents of any racist or homophobic bullying are at a very low level. RE significantly strengthens students' ability to engage with spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues because they take faith very seriously and show considerable maturity in expressing their ideas. Although there is not a specific approach to spirituality in place, many teachers highlight the significance of religious and ethical issues in their lessons. In English, for example, Shakespeare's plays are considered against the backdrop of religious views of the time.

### **The impact of collective worship on the school community is good**

Worship in the Cathedral demonstrates the good progress the school has made in achieving the statements of its Faith Vision. Each week the whole school 'collects' together in the Cathedral for an act of Christian worship. This is a unique experience and is highly valued because students gain spiritual benefit without their personal beliefs and practices being compromised. Although the degree to which they use the time to engage in personal prayer may vary, they all acknowledge the long term benefit of having regular time for reflection in a beautiful building. The celebration of Christian festivals is richly enhanced by the contribution of music, the school's specialism. The school is highly successful in its vision for music enriching the lives of all students, Cathedral choristers and non-specialists alike. Impressively, over half of the students perform in one of the many music groups and choirs. The combination of the regular pattern of Anglican worship and excellent teaching in RE means that students have a good understanding of the place of Jesus Christ in Christianity and of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The themes chosen for worship form a helpful bridge between the Church year and topics that concern students in contemporary society. The impact is greater because the themes are followed up by tutors in reflection time where good use is made of familiar classroom strategies to actively engage students. Consequently, everyone voices their thoughts and opinions and the impact on their spiritual and moral development is good. This frequently motivates students to take social action both as individuals and as a student body. The material for tutor groups is of high quality and follows a common format so that the links with biblical teaching are clear. Worship is prepared and led by members of staff working with the chaplain. Although feedback from students is increasingly informing improvements to worship along with monitoring by governors, students have limited input at the planning stage.

### **The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding**

The school has a clear vision for the scope and purpose of RE and Philosophy (REP). The curriculum already reflects its Faith Vision and promotes its core values but it is constantly being refined to prepare students for life in modern society. Discussions have begun, for example, to explore the significance of faith in world history and literature and this demonstrates the drive and ambition of the department. In response to the last inspection, the compulsory Key Stage 4 course has been skilfully designed by the subject leader to meet the needs of current students who fully support its compulsory nature. One student summed up the success of this as 'setting us up for life' and sixth formers regret that only a very limited allocation is now available to them. The popularity of the subject inspires high numbers (around 25) to choose the subject at A level and sometimes at university. This is because it is exceptionally well taught by teachers with a high level of expertise and passion for their subject. Lessons are consistently well organised so that techniques make sure every student voices an opinion are routine. The objectives for learning are phrased as challenging hypotheses for debate. Students rapidly develop skills in analysing and interpreting information and are confident to present both sides of the argument with conviction. This verbal 'rehearsal' of ideas raises the quality of subsequent written tasks. The 'Read and Respond' approach to marking is very successful. Teachers' strong subject knowledge ensures that written comments are sharply focused on religious concepts and students make mature and thoughtful responses. REP is one of the best performing subjects with consistently high results. At GCSE the proportion gaining A\*-A has been more than double the national average for the last four years, reaching 81% in 2014. All students make good and better progress including disadvantaged students. Some pockets of underachievement at A level are being addressed and 67% achieved grades A&B at AS in 2014. The systems for self-evaluation are effective. Underperformance by any specific group is rigorously analysed and prompt action taken, as in the case of adjustments to the Year 9 curriculum to better motivate students at the highest level.

### **The effectiveness of the leadership and management of the school as a church school is good**

The Academy principal and governors, particularly those who are members of the Cathedral Chapter, have had a faith inspired vision for this unique academy since its inception and this continues to inform its direction of travel. In addition to the set of core Christian values that are lived out in the life and work of the school, a distinctively Christian understanding of hope is at the heart of the school's work in raising the aspirations and achievement of the community. Its formal evaluation of effectiveness as a church school does not accurately convey the drive and ambition of the senior leadership team. Too little attention is paid to drawing conclusions from monitoring activities or to measuring progress against the very clear statements of the school's Faith Vision. Consequently, it is not clear on paper where action is most needed. In contrast, senior leaders have a detailed knowledge of the strengths and priorities of the school. Much useful discussion is underway, for example, about devising a broader sixth form curriculum that enriches students overall development whilst not detracting from the aim of working for the best possible outcomes. The chaplain has improved the quality of school worship in the Cathedral and in tutor time. His role has provided a valuable point of contact with the Dean and with the education sub-committee of governors. The pastoral side of chaplaincy is strengthened by members of staff with experience in matters of spirituality and faith. Informally, they make a significant contribution to the wellbeing and spiritual life of adults and young people, including the Cathedral choristers, but this is not recognised within the chaplaincy brief. The process of appointing staff is highly effective in recognising potential leaders who bring fresh knowledge and insight to the school. This has led to important initiatives within school and partnerships with organisations that have raised the profile of faith as well as improving the impact of leadership across both the staff and student bodies. The skills of the RE staff have developed as a result of leading training for other schools in effective practice. The high priority given to Cathedral worship and the substantial teaching time for RE have led to good progress since the last inspection and the faith ethos of this relatively new church academy is secure.