

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

Ark Charter Academy	
Hyde Park Road, Portsmouth, Southsea, PO5 4HL	
Current SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Diocese	Portsmouth
Previous SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Date of academy conversion	September 2009
Name of multi-academy trust	Ark
Date/s of inspection	20 and 21 June 2017
Date of last inspection	17 July 2012
Type of school and unique reference number	Sponsored academy 135965
Principal	Clive Barnes
Inspector's name and number	Jo Fageant 104 and Lyn Field 151

School context

This is a non-selective secondary school. It is smaller than average but is oversubscribed and from September 2017, the number of Year 7 places will increase by 50% from 120 to 180. A sixth form opened in 2014 but will close in July 2018. The principal has been in post since September 2016. The proportion of disadvantaged students is twice the national average and slightly more than average are from minority ethnic groups. The numbers of students who speak English as a second language and who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are above the national average.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of Ark Charter Academy as a Church of England school are good

- The determined and clear leadership of the new principal, supported by insightful governors, has refocused the academy on its original Christian vision of bringing hope and aspiration to this community.
- Senior leaders have been relentless in their drive to cement the newly agreed aspirations and Christian values in the working practices of the academy. This has brought urgently needed improvements to achievement, behaviour and attendance and created an orderly community in a very challenging context.
- The remarkable level of attention given by all staff to the wellbeing and achievement of all students is improving their life chances and self-belief.
- The contribution of the church to the work of the academy at diocesan, deanery and local levels is creating an effective partnership of service to the community.
- The introduction of three core Christian values and changes to the pattern and content of collective worship have transformed the profile and quality of faith-related dialogue amongst students and staff.

Areas to improve

- Consolidate the rapid and innovative developments of the last year so that approaches to the curriculum and the management of behaviour continue to be informed by the Christian values as the academy grows in size.
- Ensure that the induction of new staff and students enables them to know the origin of the academy's Christian values and how to embody them in their daily lives.
- Develop the Key Stage 3 curriculum for RE so that it is a good foundation for the new GCSE course enabling this to be re-introduced for all students.
- Develop manageable monitoring systems that have a clear focus on the impact of changes and precisely inform priorities for action.

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

At Ark Charter Academy 'everyone matters'. Students and staff see this exemplified through the three core values of justice, courage and respect. Although introduced relatively recently as a way of expressing the academy's Christian ethos, they are known and understood by everyone. They arise from Christian teachings and students are able to link them to Biblical texts. However, they are understood to be relevant to all members of the academy community. The focus on respect and courage has led to students and adults alike feeling confident to speak about their own faith and explore those of others. Students feel able to 'delve deeper' into faith-related topics. This is evident in dialogue during tutor times around profound issues supported by well-prepared reflection materials. Students like how this has given them a better understanding of the beliefs and opinions of their peers. This confidence and curiosity about questions of meaning and purpose is encouraged by and developed in religious education (RE) where justice, courage and respect are explored through engaging topics. Students talk easily about the value of RE, how it challenges their thinking and develops in them an understanding of and respect for diversity and difference within and beyond Christianity. Planning for spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development, based on a shared understanding, is included across all subjects of the curriculum. Although this practice is now standard, strategic evaluation of its impact is insufficiently precise to accurately inform future developments.

The three core values are lived out in relationships throughout the academy and in its dealings with the wider community. The return of the principal and vice principal for pastoral care has restored a sense of order and created a purposeful culture of teaching and learning. The values inform the tireless work of staff which ensures they know all students well. This knowledge means they provide appropriate encouragement, praise, support and challenge. Pastoral care for all students is of the highest quality. It is enriched by access to pastors during some lunchtimes and teachers who are available in the recreational areas at breaks and lunchtimes. This care has led to improving attendance and the successful reduction in persistent absence. Having hot chocolate with the principal (a community weekly reward) and phone calls home to parents are particularly effective ways of providing encouragement and praise. Parents appreciate how the academy works in partnership with them, showing them ways to help their children with their learning. All of these strategies, combined with good teaching and aspirational targets, have resulted in national awards for the very significantly improved progress students make in their learning. Students perceive that the three core values have improved behaviour, brought discipline and encouraged self-control. Bullying has decreased and students have the courage to challenge any instances of racism or prejudice. A Muslim student summed up this ethos when she said the academy gives her the opportunity to practice the respect for difference her faith teaches.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good

The profile of Christian worship in the academy has been raised in the last few months and this has significantly increased its impact on students' spiritual development. Leaders have monitored this change through drop-in sessions and these show that prayer and reflection are now established as a daily component of all form times. Students value and welcome this development even though there is some variation in delivery. Tutors have embraced the introduction of a more spiritual element to tutor time and are gaining the confidence to lead discussion around matters of faith. They acknowledge it requires more preparation but everyone benefits. Staff and students feel able to share their faith in an atmosphere of respect and integrity and this has deepened relationships in the academy. Prayer and reflection are invitational and all choose to attend because personal belief is not compromised in any way. The themes for worship capture students' interest, not only because they challenge perceptions but also because they prompt students in social action and 'give an optimistic start to the day'. Regular links are made to biblical teaching and the language of the Trinity is used in many prayers. Students have a good understanding of this and of the place Jesus holds in Christianity because they have learned it in RE. They are less confident about the breadth of Anglican traditions because realistic and measured decisions about the strategic development of worship mean this is part of a longer-term plan.

The leadership of worship is increasingly being distributed across the whole community. The head of RE has led the changes and set high expectations in the quality of materials produced for form groups. Other departments are now contributing. The academy's core Christian values of justice, respect and courage are constantly promoted in worship and are equally seen in the manner in which worship is delivered and received. A student with learning difficulties read a prayer in whole school worship and other students, recognising her courage, showed their respect for her with spontaneous applause. The FICSH (Faith in school) group has previously lacked direction but now has a better sense of purpose. Student voice is increasingly being taken seriously and has prompted a major change to student participation in whole school services. The Easter celebration involved students performing extracts from Jesus Christ Superstar and left a lasting impression on the whole community.

The effectiveness of the religious education is good

RE sits within a humanities department led with expertise, energy, passion and commitment by a well-qualified subject specialist. Her enthusiasm for the subject, partnered with her strong desire to share a love of learning with students means they enjoy RE. Similarly, despite their different specialisms, all the teachers in the department have come to enjoy RE. Monitoring records show almost all teaching is consistently good and some is outstanding. This is recognised and very much appreciated by students. Collaborative planning allows teachers to support each other and capitalise on one another's particular strengths. As a consequence of this and a rigorous assessment system, lessons and tasks are well matched to the abilities of different students enabling them to learn well. A discursive style of marking helps students understand what they have done well and what they should do to improve. The expectation that they will respond to this challenge supports the good progress they make. There is easy talk about the value of the subject, with students recognising the wide range of skills it develops. They appreciate how RE challenges media misrepresentations and broadens their horizons. It helps them understand what different people believe and why they act as they do. Students confirmed that 'We learn about the world, develop respect for different cultures and different ways of life.' Positive engagement with questions of meaning and purpose spills over into playground discussions and enriches SMSC development. The confidence that students now have in the subject, and the concern that this should not be undermined, has led to the decision that for a limited time not all students will undertake a Key Stage 4 examination course in RE. In the interim, teachers are working hard to revise the course for the younger students so it better prepares them to succeed in the new style GCSE examination. The department has a record of examination results in line with national expectations with students making good progress from their starting points. They demonstrate a genuine curiosity about religious beliefs and their impact so they develop a secure understanding of key aspects of Christianity and the other religions they study.

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

The vision for the academy to serve the challenging needs of its local community has not wavered since its opening but the appointment of a new principal has proved to be a pivotal point in its development. His uncompromising and inspirational leadership has swiftly achieved a transformation. Due to the extraordinary level of care provided for vulnerable students and their families, the academy is an orderly and harmonious place. It touches students' lives in ways that alleviate the impact of hardship on their wellbeing and achievement.

A strong team ethic is emerging among leaders built on trust and a shared passion for the academy's mission and purpose. Middle leaders are increasingly being given a taste of responsibility at a senior level. The head of RE has relished the opportunity for whole school responsibility in areas specific to the leadership of a church school. The principal has been appointed chair of the local secondary headteachers' association. He sees this role as collaborating with others to ensure that the ethos of the academy helps to shape education across Portsmouth for the greater good. Work with the diocese has shone a spotlight on exactly what was needed to give an explicitly Christian expression to the existing motto of 'Work hard, be nice and no excuses'. The Three A's (Aspiration for All, Achievement for All, Active Participation for All) have created a new sense of purpose but it is the three core Christian values of justice, courage and respect that are widely regarded as having breathed new life into the existing Christian character of the academy.

Difficult short term decisions have been taken to secure long term benefits for the community. These decisions have been informed by leaders' detailed understanding of the academy's performance and supported by Ark structures and moderations. Governors accepted leaders' assessment that the reduction in time allocated to RE and shortcomings in the Key Stage 3 curriculum meant that students were not adequately prepared to tackle the new GCSE specifications. Governors remain fully committed to the importance of RE and to increasing teaching time, with a view to re-introducing RE GCSE for all students. A financial decision was taken to close the sixth form but with agreement to expand other year groups to increase what the academy offers to the community. Comprehensive plans are in place to manage these changes whilst sustaining recent improvements. In the first year of many new initiatives, the focus of monitoring has understandably been on checking the provision in place. However, too little attention has been given to the analysis of what is working well to help set priorities for maintaining the current momentum as the academy grows in size.

The bishop takes a particular interest in the academy and the appointments of the chair of governors and vicar of St Luke's are proving instrumental in empowering the academy to play its role in Christian service of the community. The wider church family (deanery) is contributing to the wellbeing and spiritual life of the academy. Local clergy from the deanery and youth chaplaincy team have signed up to be a regular presence in the prayer room, the archdeacon is involved in RE lessons and school pastors are available and sought out by students during lunchtime. These are the beginning of a growing and much greater presence of the church in the school and one that is being wisely managed by the vital partnership between the principal, vicar and chair of governors.