



# The River School

## Inspection report

This inspection was carried out under section 162 (A) of the Education Act 2002 as amended. Bridge Schools Inspectorate (BSI) has been approved by the Secretary of State in the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to undertake inspections in designated independent schools within membership of the Christian Schools Trust (CST) or the Association of Muslim Schools UK (AMSUK).

**DCSF number:** 885/6030  
**Association:** CST  
**Date of inspection:** 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> February 2010  
**Lead Inspector:** Mrs M A Buckingham  
**Team inspectors:** Mrs F Moolla  
Mr R Britton  
Miss J Morgan

**Age range of pupils:** 3-16 years  
**Number on roll:** 166  
**Full-time:** 80 boys      62 girls  
**Part-time:** 13 boys      11 girls  
**Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need:** 3

**Proprietor:** Worcester Christian Education Trust  
**Principal:** Mr Timothy Crow  
**Address of school:** Oakfield House  
Droitwich Road  
Worcester  
WR3 7ST

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## **The purpose and scope of the inspection**

The main purpose of the inspection is twofold. It is to advise the DCSF whether the school continues to meet the requirements for registration, and to determine whether the school's religious ethos continues to meet the expectations of its association. Ofsted monitors the work of independent inspectorates, including a sample of inspections, and you can find the latest evaluation of the work of The Bridge Schools Inspectorate on the Ofsted website.

## **Information about the school**

The River School will celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year as a Christian independent coeducational day school for pupils aged between 3 and 16 years and includes The Brook School Nursery. It is situated close to the city centre of Worcester. Pupils live within the city or travel from surrounding towns such as Redditch and Droitwich. The school aims to be inclusive and does not select pupils by ability or religious affiliation. Parents must be in sympathy with the school's Christian aims and values and about one half of pupils are from practising Christian families. A significant minority of pupils are identified with learning difficulties that require some additional support; three pupils have statements of special educational need.

One of the school's main aims is '*...To educate each pupil imparting knowledge and skills, developing initiative and nurturing Christian character and faith...*'

The school was last inspected in 2007 at which time three regulations were not met.

## **Evaluation of the school**

The River School works with a shared Christian commitment and steadfastness in pursuing its aims and provides a good quality of education. The Christian ethos underpins all aspects of the school's life, helping pupils to feel recognised as children of God, cherished as individuals and valued as members of the school community. This contributes significantly to pupils' excellent personal development. They have a very good start in the Nursery and this continues throughout the school so that by the time they leave they are confident young people, considerate and respectful of others. The curriculum overall provides a good framework through which pupils learn effectively, particularly those identified as having particular learning difficulties. Overall the quality of teaching is good; on some occasions it has outstanding features and is never less than satisfactory. Pupils are very well cared for and parents appreciate this and are overwhelmingly supportive of the school. Pupils enjoy school and value the care they receive.

The Principal provides thoughtful leadership and inspiration within the school. It is a time of change and transition in the leadership, as the school is reassessing its management structure and responsibilities. The senior management team bring differing and complementary skills to the ongoing discussion on the future direction of the school. A strategic development plan has been prepared to guide growth in order to consolidate the many strengths of the school, so they might be sustained

and provide a framework for development. The school meets all but one of the regulations.

### **Quality of education**

The curriculum policy is firmly based on the Christian ethos of the school and guides the curriculum, which provides good opportunities for pupils to learn effectively. Pupils make progress in literacy and mathematics, as well as experiencing scientific, creative and aesthetic, physical, technological and practical areas of learning.

The curriculum in the lower school (Key Stages 1 and 2) is carefully thought out and includes the subjects of the National Curriculum alongside Bible study and French for the older pupils. A two-year cycle of topics ensures that subjects are progressively developed and avoids unnecessary repetition in pupils' learning in the mixed age classes. The strong emphasis on acquiring good literacy and mathematical skills is well established so that pupils make good progress in these key areas.

In the senior school at Key Stage 3 the National Curriculum, including French, continues as the basis for the curriculum, with aspects of design and technology including cookery, textiles and some woodworking. It also includes Bible studies at both Key Stages 3 and 4. At Key Stage 4 all pupils follow courses working towards GCSE in English (some may also take literature according to ability), mathematics, either one or two sciences and religious studies (RS). Pupils choose individual subjects as options, and the school attempts to accommodate pupils' preferences as far as is practicable. Subject options change year on year due to the availability of staff and resources, constraining what might be offered. Currently, options for GCSE include history, geography, music, art, physical education (PE), business and communication or French. Pupils can also study non examined subjects such as games and cookery. The school wishes to more fully meet pupils' abilities and aptitudes and is rightly looking to provide a wider range of accredited courses at Key Stage 4, other than GCSE, for the pupils of all abilities. A significant feature of the senior school curriculum is the fortnightly activities on Friday afternoons as part of the distinctive Delta department for pupils in Years 9 to 11. This programme exemplifies the school's aims and is seen as marking the stage of development as pupils move into young adulthood. Character building is a focus to develop skills such as leadership, cooperation and self confidence through many interesting opportunities to work in teams and discuss topics relevant to young adults as they mature.

The curriculum is enriched with a range of activities such as sports, chess, drama and music, offering pupils opportunities to develop and extend their talents. The school makes good use of visits to museums and places of historical and geographic interest to bring topics alive. The residential event at the end of Key Stage 2 is a valuable learning experience and is greatly enjoyed. Trips and residential events continue for older pupils, widening their horizons. These additional activities contribute to all pupils' personal development.

Personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE) is interwoven as an important part of the curriculum starting with the youngest pupils and in the lower

school. This continues at Key Stage 3 as pupils follow a well planned course, including recently developed 'life skills' units. Older pupils in Year 11 say that the careers information provided, for example, through individual mentoring and parents' evenings, is useful and they welcome the opportunities to visit the local colleges on open days. The vast majority of pupils go on to academic courses at college or sixth forms. Some pupils have undertaken work experience, for example, within The Brook School Nursery. A review of the careers education and work related learning across the senior school would help with coordination, as part of the school's planned curriculum development for older pupils.

Planning across the Key Stages takes note of National Curriculum materials and is set within the Christian 'Kingdom' concepts. In the lower school the current revision of schemes of work is providing a detailed and coordinated approach to planning. Medium term plans clearly identify the skills, as well as the knowledge to be learnt leading onto lesson plans that are prepared by individual teachers; this provides a useful structure for pupils' learning. In the senior school written planning varies in quality and detail. For example, in English, history and PE, the planning details not only knowledge but the skills that pupils are to learn over the term, year and Key Stage. Other schemes of work are a briefer overview of topics to be covered. Overall schemes of work do not explicitly show how assessment is to be integrated into the planning process.

Pupils are well prepared to take on their future economic responsibilities as they make good progress in mathematical skills and in their personal attitudes that are underpinned by Christian values. They are taught to work hard and use resources carefully. Pupils are given opportunities to prepare for, and understand their responsibilities as they move into adulthood. Not only do pupils achieve well in examinations that lead onto the next stage of their education, but also grow in confidence and in their considerate attitudes and respect for others.

Provision for pupils with learning difficulties and those with statements of special educational need is consistently good. Early identification and ongoing liaison between the knowledgeable special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) and class teachers ensure there is regular review. Pupils are very well known to staff and individual education plans are written and implemented for pupils who need them. This is effectively overseen by the SENCO. Pupils' statements of special educational need are appropriately reviewed, as the school works effectively with other agencies and specialists who support individual pupils.

Overall the quality of teaching is good, and on occasion it has outstanding elements; it is never less than satisfactory. Good features are well planned lessons with objectives being shared with the pupils. The excellent relationships and very positive attitudes of pupils help set a good environment for learning. The moral and faith dimension is clearly established and made explicit in lessons. On occasion, teachers' good subject knowledge and obvious enthusiasm for the subject is infectious and fully engages pupils in their learning. For example, in Year 11 art, the enthusiastic teaching and high expectations enabled pupils to become engrossed and make exceptional progress in their GCSE course work. Teachers effectively use a variety of activities such as group and paired work to help pupils' learning. In a Year 7 English lesson the whole class worked productively together, based on the

teacher's assessment of pupils' previous knowledge. This helped consolidate their understanding and, working in pairs, they were able to develop ideas to add verses to a poem they were studying. Pupils enjoy opportunities for practical activity extending their skills. In the Year 1 and 2 class pupils made good progress in the science investigation on natural and man made products becoming fully engaged and recording their results appropriately.

Many lessons demonstrate that teachers know their pupils well and plan effectively to help all make progress. For example, the wide range of ability and differing aptitudes of pupils in a Year 10 business and communication lesson was taken carefully into account so that all pupils were able to contribute through an engaging task on contrasting different types of office organisation. With patient encouragement pupils were able to show good progress basing their answers on their increased understanding. In the lower school there is careful organisation of Key Stage 2 classes into three differing ability groups for literacy and mathematics. In a literacy session, an engaging task and challenging questions were effective as the abler pupils tackled persuasive writing, showing very good vocabulary and language skills. Similarly, in another group, less able pupils were given a clear structure and positive encouragement as they enjoyed sharing their own sentences, demonstrating a good understanding of alliteration. Teaching assistants are effectively deployed in the lower school to support both individual pupils and the whole class more widely.

In the satisfactory lessons many of these good features are present. Teachers' subject knowledge is good and classes are well managed. While the teaching is thoughtfully planned and is encouraging, the tasks set do not always ensure abler pupils have more challenging work than others in the group. Opportunities are not sufficiently extended so that pupils can apply their knowledge; too often the teacher takes the lead.

Assessment is satisfactory overall with some good features. Teachers know the pupils well and there is much day-to-day informal assessment, helping pupils to improve. Their work is marked regularly and, on occasion helpful comments show pupils ways to make progress. Pupils are assessed regularly throughout the lower school and into Key Stage 3 using a range of formal methods, for example, reading and spelling tests. The recent introduction of assessment at Key Stage 3 using subject specific National Curriculum statements of attainment is at an early stage and beginning to provide additional information on pupils' progress. Taken together there is much assessment information but it is not yet consolidated into a form that allows senior managers and teachers to evaluate individual pupils' progress across the curriculum as they move through the school.

Resources are sufficient in quality and quantity to effectively support learning. Pupils' use of information and communication technology (ICT) has improved since the last inspection but remains an area for further development. It is not yet fully integrated into lessons, or shown in planning across all subjects and key stages. The introduction, at the beginning of this academic year, led by the deputy head teacher, of web books with wireless access to the internet, is a significant development in improving pupils' opportunities. Pupils enjoy using them in their

work. At present, financial resources do not allow for all classes to have a full set but this is the school's intention as the benefits are seen to enhance learning.

### **Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils**

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils is outstanding and a significant strength of the school. Fundamental to all of school life is the importance of relationships built on the shared understanding of Christian aims and values between the staff, pupils and parents. From an early age pupils experience a rich environment of acceptance, support and encouragement so that senior pupils become increasingly mature, self-aware and self-confident, free to explore their developing Christian faith. The staff are excellent role models, in this respect, for pupils to emulate.

Behaviour within the classroom and around the school is excellent. This is underpinned by pupils' good sense of right and wrong within a moral ethos that is integral to all areas of school life. Pupils are polite, respectful, caring and supportive of each other and their teachers. The older pupils value the special relationship they have with staff. As one Year 10 pupil commented, "Teachers are more like friends – but you still do what they say. You can ask them anything". Pupils are aware of limited friendship choice within their year group as numbers are small, but view this positively. They commented, "You can't avoid people so you have to work through relationships."

Pupils' increasing sense of responsibility builds as they move through the school culminating in Year 9, 10 and 11 within the Delta department where they are encouraged to think independently and take responsibility for their actions. This project further develops their initiative as they willingly contribute to both the school and wider community. They learn to value and build closer relationships as seen with the Delta pupils' theatre production of "The Diary of Anne Frank". They worked collaboratively as a team, building their self-confidence, sense of cooperation and support for each other, benefiting the personal development of all pupils including nearly half of the cast having special educational needs.

Further projects enhance their excellent social development as they become involved in local community projects such as visiting and working alongside young people from the College for the Blind. Also they have helped disabled people to plant out flower borders in a local park and, on another occasion assisted with preparing meals for the homeless as part of the Worcester City Mission.

Pupils gain both insight and understanding of public institutions and services in England through PSHCE, history and RS. For example, in Year 7 RS lessons pupils look at right and wrong with respect to the law. In Year 8 they study the history of constitutional reform and in Year 9 look at public institutions in England and Wales.

Pupils develop an increasing awareness of their own culture and a growing respect for other cultures. From their early years, the Nursery pupils have cultural days affording them the opportunity to experience and embrace another culture through the shared experiences, for example, of a lady from Zimbabwe who shows artefacts, clothing and food for the pupils to taste and handle. The older pupils have the

opportunity to be involved with exchange visits to Christian schools in Bulgaria and Holland. They work collaboratively with Bulgarian pupils running a two day holiday club with Bible based activities, crafts, music, songs and sports. They experience living in another culture, working through translators. The school has links also with the charity “Hands” in Thailand working with needy children. Art lessons provide cross cultural links and within the school community there are families of other faiths – Hindu and Muslim. This provides pupils with valuable insight into life within other cultures in Britain today. Experiences like these actively promote their understanding and tolerance of different cultural traditions.

### **Welfare, health and safety of pupils**

The provision for welfare, health and safety of the pupils is good. The caring Christian ethos provides pupils with good guidance, and as a result pupils feel safe and secure. Attendance is good and pupils enjoy coming to school. Pupils are taught to take responsibility for their own actions and safety and, as a result their behaviour in lessons and around school is excellent. Pupils value the friendships they make and kindness shown to them and well placed praise from teachers. A healthy lifestyle is encouraged through the development of faith, PE, sport, science and PSHCE. Pupils are encouraged to bring fruit, healthy packed lunches and water bottles are at hand in classrooms.

The required school policies have been reviewed and updated. Consequently, acting on the findings of the last inspection the school now meets the required regulations as there has been appropriate training on safeguarding and child protection. Similarly, risk assessments of educational visits are in place. Staff understand and implement a range of procedures which promote the well-being of pupils, for example, staff are aware of the need to be alert to E- safety issues. First aid is well organised. A member of the school community with fire safety expertise has trained staff in the use of fire extinguishers, as part of the school’s fire safety procedures.

The school meets the requirement of the Disability Discrimination Act and has begun with the next stage of the three year development plan addressing access to buildings and the curriculum. Careful consideration has been given in planning and building the new classrooms for ease of access and use.

### **Suitability of the proprietor and staff**

The school ensures that the required CRB checks are carried out on staff prior to appointment. The finance administrator, on behalf of the proprietors has worked hard recently to collate all the required information. A single central record has been compiled but it is not fully complete. There are some gaps in the recording of the verification of the identity and qualifications, if required, for all staff. The school therefore, does not meet the requirement in this respect. The school understands what needs to be done and intends to take urgent action and keep all the required records in an electronic form in future.

### **School’s premises and accommodation**

The school occupies a large late Georgian Grade 2 listed building with many outbuildings, set in 8.5 acres of attractive wooded and open grassed areas, which provide a rich educational resource for the pupils. Since the last inspection the school has made significant improvements to enhance the learning environment. A new roof has been put on the main building and improvements have been made to the Sports Hall. New classrooms have been built for the senior school which meet high environmental standards and plans have been approved by the local authority to replace the art room. A maintenance programme is in place to refurbish other classrooms and areas around the site overseen by the full-time caretaker.

All classrooms are of an adequate size to facilitate learning; are light and airy and have appropriate size furnishings. Walls and corridors, particularly in the main building, are decorated with attractive displays along with impressive senior art work. As part of the school's enrichment programme, the grounds are being increasingly used as an educational resource, for example, The Forest School, which gives good opportunities for extending outdoor learning; Talking Tree Trail, Reflective Pond and Years 5 and 6 garden areas for growing vegetables. A new additional ramped entrance to the front of The Brook School Nursery is under construction to improve access to the building and grounds. Pupils enjoy using the many different outside play spaces, including the purpose built adventure playground.

### **Provision of information for parents, carers and others**

The school makes available to all, the required information and policies through the school website. The website is clear in its presentation and reflects the school's faith commitment well. The River School promotional DVD is a good introduction to the school and includes positive comments from a range of its members. The school's termly newsletters inform parents and the school community of the wide ranging activities enjoyed by all, offering inspiration.

The vast majority of parents say they are very happy with the school and that it is well run and they feel comfortable in approaching staff should they need to. They say that they are kept well informed through parents' evenings and open days. At various points in the year parents receive reports that inform them of the progress and attainment of their child across the curriculum subjects and on pupils' character development and attitude in keeping with the aims of the school. One parent commented, "We find all staff very easy to talk to. Our children love coming to this school."

### **Procedures for handling complaints**

The school has a written policy and procedures for handling any complaints that meet requirements and there have been no formal complaints in the past year.

### **Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage**

The provision for the 37 Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) pupils is good with some outstanding features. The Brook School Nursery for three and four year olds is an effective and valuable part of this provision. Their aim is *'to provide a relaxed, happy atmosphere which enables pupils to learn about themselves, the world around*

*them, and each other; providing a solid foundation for them physically, socially, emotionally and spiritually on which they can build the rest of their lives.'*

The Nursery's long, medium and short term plans are outstanding in their creativity and clarity, reflecting the spiritual dimension which the staff see as underpinning the other six areas of learning. For example, during the week of the inspection the activities were skilfully planned around the story of Jesus healing a blind man. The Forest School, culture days, trips and other initiatives contribute to providing a stimulating setting for the pupils. The qualified, experienced and very committed staff team demonstrate a clear understanding of the age group and ensure that teacher-led sessions are interspersed with opportunities for the pupils to initiate their own activities. Pupils make good progress in the Nursery. However, there are times when the more able pupils in the Reception class are not sufficiently challenged and this reduces the progress they make. The Reception class joins with the Nursery on Friday afternoons for art, craft and other informal activities.

In response to the last Ofsted inspection larger, outdoor, wheeled toys have been purchased as well as indoor apparatus to foster pupils' physical development. There is ample space in the fenced playground for the pupils to play safely as well as the extensive grounds providing rich opportunities for outdoor activities.

Ongoing anecdotal observations, photographs and formal assessment are well recorded though the staff would like to develop their assessment procedures further. To facilitate the sharing of information between the other settings, which some pupils attend, the staff are planning to develop an information sharing policy. The staff are continually evaluating their work and making recommendations for further development. They regularly attend and benefit from training sessions arranged by the local authority.

The EYFS staff enjoy good relationships with parents who are given a very well thought out Parent Visit Pack providing all the information required for the EYFS. Healthy foods are promoted and guidelines for pupils' behaviour in school outlined. A parent commented on the setting, "I am more and more convinced the longer my children are there, what an awesome and life-shaping experience it is for them."

The school has managed the implementation of EYFS very well indeed, especially in the Nursery where the leadership and management are good. The EYFS administrator is a valued member of the team and has set up effective systems to facilitate the smooth running of the setting.

The good provision for the welfare, health and safety of the pupils is prioritised, including respect and care for one another. The behaviour of the pupils is generally very good, both indoors and outdoors. It would, however, be useful for more resources to be labeled and at a more accessible height for the pupils. All the requirements for the EYFS are met.

What the school could do to further improve:

- Nursery and Reception staff to plan work together to share good practice and to ensure continuity and differentiation for pupils.

## **Compliance with the regulations**

The school meets the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act.

The school meets all but one of the regulations for registration.

In order to meet fully the regulations in **standard 4**, the suitability of the proprietor and staff, the school must:

- complete fully, as a matter of urgency, the gaps in the single central record to show that the checks have been made on all staff to verify their identify and qualifications (if required) (Regulations 4(2)(a)(vii)).

## **Meeting the expectations of CST**

The school's religious ethos continues to meet the expectations of CST.

## **What the school could do to improve further**

As part of future development the school might wish to consider:

- consolidating assessment information across the school
- continuing with the progress made for ICT to be an integral support for learning throughout the curriculum
- reviewing the coordination of careers education and work related learning as part of the curriculum development in the senior school.