



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 Education (DfE) to undertake inspections in designated independent schools within membership of the Christian Schools Trust (CST) or the Association of Muslim Schools UK (AMSUK).

DfE number: 885/6030
Association: CST
Date of inspection: 25th-28th February 2013
Lead Inspector: Mr C Barnett
Team inspectors: Mr Y Seedat
Mr G Barnes

Age range of pupils: 3-16 years
Number on roll: 154
Full-time: 69 boys 61 girls
Part-time:* 9 boys 15 girls
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need: 2

Proprietor: Worcester Christian Education Trust
Head teacher: Mrs C Parry
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The purpose and scope of the inspection

The main purpose of the inspection is twofold. It is to advise the DfE 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 was founded in September 1985. It is a Christian, coeducational, independent day school for pupils and young people aged between 3 and 16 years; it includes The Brook Nursery. The school occupies a large Georgian Grade 2 listed building with outbuildings, set in an estate of woodland and open grass. It is located close to the centre of Worcester and its pupils live in the city or travel from the surrounding area. The school seeks to be inclusive and does not select pupils by ability or religious affiliation. Nearly a quarter of the pupils are identified as having learning difficulties which require additional support; two pupils have statements of special educational need. All staff are practising Christians and in full support of the school's Christian ethos. Parents must be in sympathy with the school's aims and values; about one half of pupils are from practising Christian families.

The school states that its purpose is 'to place Jesus Christ at the centre of our life and activity. We believe that this is the way to provide children and young people with stable foundations for their futures. Consequently, all aspects of the School's work are measured against the standards provided by biblical Christian belief.' Its mission statement says that it seeks to educate each pupil by imparting knowledge and skills, developing initiative and nurturing Christian character and faith.

The school was last inspected in 2010 at which time one regulation was not met.

Evaluation of the school

The River School is a good school with some notably strong features. In particular, the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of its pupils is outstanding, reflecting the commitment of the staff and the support of parents for the Christian values that lie at the heart of what the school does. A sense of fellowship and personal sacrifice characterise all that the staff do; they are excellent role models for the pupils who respond by demonstrating consistently high standards of behaviour and an appreciation of what their teachers do for them. Pupils make good progress in their work. They feel well cared for and that they are trusted and valued members of the school community; they enjoy going to school and the friendships they make there. They speak confidently about the spiritual dimension of their lives and the part that the school plays in fostering a sense of God's presence. The quality of education in the Nursery and Reception classes is outstanding, ensuring that the pupils have the best possible start to their school career. In the lower and senior schools, the quality of the curriculum, teaching and assessment is always at least good, and the school has made some notable advances since its previous inspection especially in recording and reporting on pupils' progress. Parental support for their

children's education and the aims of the school is excellent, as is communication between home and school.

The strengths of the principal and the head teacher complement each other extremely well. As a result, they provide excellent leadership for the school at a challenging time. There has recently been a significant change in the senior management, with the former principal stepping down. The former head teacher has now taken over as principal and he has been replaced by the previous deputy head teacher in a move towards a more distributive leadership model. They both know that this will require a significant redefinition of their working relationship. They are helped by their shared commitment to the school's aims and a determination to ensure that it thrives; for example, they appreciate the need to broaden the curriculum in Years 10 and 11, the value of re-engaging with past pupils and friends of the school community, the importance of communicating the school's aims and achievements more effectively and the benefits of adopting a more structured approach to staff development. The proposed review of the school's development plan and the generation of a new one will provide the opportunity for these intentions to be clarified and respective roles and responsibilities more clearly defined.

The school now meets all the statutory requirements.

Quality of education provided

The quality of the curriculum is good. It is broad and balanced, and is accessible to all pupils whatever their ability and academic development. It is underpinned by Christian values which are explicitly stated in departmental schemes of work and are integral to the classroom practice of every teacher on the basis that 'The teacher is the curriculum'. Teachers at The River School model the Christian life and bring its values to bear in all that they do.

Lower school pupils follow the National Curriculum and a course of Bible Studies. They study numeracy, literacy, science, geography, history, physical education (PE), design and technology and art; they start French in Year 3. Older pupils make increasing use of the facilities available to the senior school to ensure consistency and smooth their transition to Year 7. Pupils in Years 7 to 9 continue to follow the National Curriculum and Bible studies together with cookery. In Year 10 all pupils follow a core programme of English, mathematics, science, religious education (RE) and information and communication technology (ICT) together with a range of options. Since the last inspection, the school has endeavoured to broaden what it offers to pupils in Years 10 and 11 particularly, but it is limited by the small size of some year groups, the wish to preserve the Christian basis of the curriculum and the need to cater for pupils with a wide range of abilities. For this reason, it has abandoned the recent experiment of offering IGCSEs and is currently looking at what vocational options can be integrated into the curriculum.

Since the last inspection, the school has made considerable progress in developing the use of ICT and a new computer suite has recently been opened. The incorporation of ICT into schemes of work is evident in, for example, English and history but generally is at an early stage. The school acknowledges that it still has

more to do in terms of building up the confidence of staff in the use of the new technologies.

Pupils' educational experience is enriched by a varied and interesting extra-curricular programme which includes visiting speakers at the weekly whole school assembly, sporting activities, art and craft clubs, drama, music and chess. Some of these are run by the older pupils on behalf of the younger ones. There is also a good range of outside visits which make particularly good use of local resources as well as those further afield: these include residential trips for older pupils and exchanges with Christian schools in Europe. Wherever possible, the school seeks to make full use of the grounds, notably the resources provided by the forest school and in various gardening and landscaping projects which celebrate God's creation. The school is intent on developing its outdoor curriculum; it has recently opened a wildlife pond and it has received an award from the Woodland Trust.

The Delta scheme, which takes pupils in Years 9 to 11 off timetable for an afternoon once a fortnight, is a unique and particularly enriching feature of the school's curriculum. It includes elements of careers guidance, by which pupils are challenged to take greater responsibility for their own future. They are encouraged to explore various career pathways, visit local businesses and colleges, and prepare CVs. In this and in the personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE) course, pupils are introduced to the responsibilities of adult life and the opportunities of the world of work. The scheme also challenges pupils to explore where they stand spiritually, to re-commit themselves to the moral and faith dimension underpinning school life, and to take on a leadership role within the school community. Current and former pupils comment on how beneficial this is in developing their self-confidence and supporting them on their own spiritual journey.

Long and medium term curriculum planning are particular strengths of the lower school. The schemes of work conform to a well-structured, standardised format and follow a two-year cycle with topics building effectively on one another to ensure progression and aid individual lesson planning. Biblical concepts are woven through each subject and area of learning. Since the last inspection, curriculum planning in the senior school has improved; all schemes of work now follow a common format. However, the quality and level of detail of some are still too variable.

The school places considerable importance on the early identification of pupils with special educational needs; the special educational needs coordinator works closely with both parents and class teachers, especially in the lower school, to monitor progress and ensure that pupils' individual education plans are implemented effectively. The school's caring ethos seeks to nurture and support those encountering particular barriers to learning. Provision for the statemented pupils is outstanding with their assigned teaching assistants offering valuable practical support. The school has a relatively high proportion of pupils with low level special educational needs. In the lower school, there is good support for these pupils through differentiated activities and close collaboration between teachers and teaching assistants. In the senior school, lesson planning does not always identify clearly the individual needs of pupils. The school is aware of this issue and is seeking to provide further practical training for staff.

The quality of teaching is at least good; sometimes, it is outstanding. Teachers exemplify the Biblical values of mutual respect and caring for others; they know their pupils well and freely assist individuals when required.

There are many examples of outstanding practice. The features of the best lessons include excellent classroom management and the use of praise and encouragement by teachers to ensure beneficial working relationships between them and their pupils and between the pupils themselves. Open questioning is well used to elicit higher order thinking skills and extend pupils' learning. Lessons proceed at a brisk pace, yet the opportunity is taken when appropriate for pupils to be given time to reflect. There is explicit reference to the spiritual dimension in learning. An appropriate range of activities is employed and resources are used creatively; for example, in an outstanding Year 9 music lesson, pupils explored rhythmical forms using only those everyday items to be found in the classroom. Teachers display good subject knowledge and the ability to communicate an enthusiasm for their subject to their pupils; this was particularly evident in an excellent art lesson on the creation of a collage. Lesson planning builds effectively on prior learning and homework is used to consolidate lessons learned and effect the transition to the next stage. In the lower school, teachers work closely with teaching assistants to give effective support to those with learning difficulties.

Where teaching is less effective, the pace of the lesson is allowed to drop and pupils go off-task; there is too much teacher-led activity and too little pupil interaction. In lessons and work seen, differentiation, when it is evident in planning, is by outcome rather than task; there is insufficient challenge for the most able and few examples of extended writing in the work of lower ability pupils. In the senior school, more thought needs to be given to how best to integrate the role of teaching assistants in lesson planning.

Pupils make good progress and achieve results at GCSE which are consistently above, and often well above, both the local and national average. In Years 3 to 10, progress is evident in the work seen and in the regular end of year tests. At the same time, from a very young age, pupils are equipped with the language necessary to explore their own spirituality and discuss faith issues. This was notably evident in an excellent Years 3 and 4 Bible studies lesson where pupils considered the implications of God's banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.

Across the school marking is intermittent. The best practice is to be found in English where there are good examples of helpful, formative comments. Elsewhere, marking is cursory and includes little written feedback about the quality of the work seen. It tends to concentrate on presentational issues rather than content; no targets are evident, indicating that pupils do not know the level at which they are working.

A new system of recording pupils' progress is in the process of being introduced. This seeks to record their attainment and effort by means of a four point scale and staff are currently devising an agreed set of grade descriptors to be used by all teachers. When completed, this will allow more precise tracking of pupils' progress and the targeting of intervention. In the senior school each pupil receives two reports a year and all pupils receive a detailed end of year report which assesses their spiritual and social development as well as their academic progress. It includes

targets for improvement and senior school pupils are encouraged to produce a written response indicating how they propose making further progress. There is also at least one parents' evening a year for all pupils together with informal contacts between parents and staff.

Overall, considerable progress has been made since the last inspection. More still needs to be done in terms of regularly notifying pupils of their progress and using assessment information to inform lesson planning, for example by tailoring material and tasks to meet pupils' individual needs.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

Provision for the pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. The school successfully achieves its aim of educating its pupils for life by providing them with rich opportunities to explore their Christian faith as well as fostering a sense of respect for other faith traditions.

Throughout the school, pupils' behaviour is excellent; they feel valued as individuals. They understand the importance of taking responsibility for their actions, caring for one another and working well together. From the Nursery onwards, pupils benefit from their teachers' willingness to discuss openly their own faith. They are encouraged to explore and articulate their responses to the opportunities and challenges of their spiritual life. In lessons such as PSHCE, pupils consider such issues as peer pressure and making wise choices, thereby enhancing their self-awareness and developing self-confidence. As a result of their involvement in the Delta project, older pupils learn how to show initiative and take a leadership role in a wide range of projects designed to benefit both the school and the local community. These include landscaping and building projects on the school site and support for Worcester's Mission for the Homeless.

Pupils' insight into and understanding of public institutions and democratic values is successfully encouraged both inside the classroom, in subjects such as history and PSHCE, as well as outside. The recent introduction of a pupil council following the annual well-being survey was welcomed by the large majority of pupils and serves to provide a meaningful context for their views to be considered. As a result, pupils have made some valuable suggestions to improve the life of the school and these are being considered at leadership team meetings. The invitation to the Year 11 representative to take part in selected management team meetings is a further innovative step in this process.

The school places a considerable emphasis on promoting pupils' appreciation of and respect for other cultures and faith traditions. For example, in lower school Bible studies, geography and art lessons, teachers introduce pupils to a range of world cultures and use artefacts and clothing to inspire them to appreciate the unique beauty and underlying values of each tradition. In their art and geography lessons, Year 5 and 6 pupils made colourful Japanese kites which are now displayed throughout the lower school. In addition, parents from other cultural traditions are invited into school to talk about their upbringing, traditional dress and food. In the senior school, the schemes of work for RE, art, history, geography and business studies in particular, place a strong emphasis on giving pupils opportunities to

experience life through the eyes of people from other countries, whilst successfully offering a balanced view of past and present political and economic theories. The various exchange visits to schools in Bulgaria, France and the Netherlands provide a unique opportunity for older pupils to experience at first hand the lives of their contemporaries in other lands. The recent well-being survey confirmed that pupils of other cultures and faiths felt that their perspectives were respected and valued by others. This outstanding provision can be further enhanced through visits to the places of worship of other faiths and the invitation to speakers from other faiths to come to the school.

The school is aware of the importance of providing for the balanced presentation of opposing political views and successfully ensures this through its programme of visiting speakers; in the near future one of the school's trustees will be undertaking a presentation on the British voting system and the role of political parties under the title 'What do we believe and stand for and why?'. This approach is also reflected in subject schemes of work. For example, in Year 9 history pupils are invited to compare democracy and dictatorship from their own Christian perspective; in Year 10 and 11 RE, they are asked to consider the impact of differing political views on the evolution of society.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety is good. Pupils are safe at school. They are made well aware of and show due consideration for their own welfare, health and safety, and school policies are underpinned by Christian values promoting responsibility, care for one another, and protecting the environment. The school's policies and procedures for safeguarding are robust: all staff, including the designated person, are suitably trained at the required intervals, and a safer recruitment policy is implemented effectively.

The Christian belief in reconciliation and forgiveness is instilled in the pupils from an early age. Pupils behave sensibly. They confirm that bullying rarely occurs, and parents comment that when disputes between pupils take place, staff intervene promptly and sensitively to resolve them without any lingering feelings of acrimony. The school makes pupils aware of e-safety and the dangers of using the internet inappropriately. All of the required health and safety policies and procedures, including those for first-aid, have full regard for the welfare of the pupils and are implemented effectively. The premises comply with all health and safety requirements and the school has good regard for fire safety. Fire drills are conducted regularly and are accurately recorded. The school carries out thorough risk assessments for all activities both in and out of school to ensure that pupils are always kept safe. The school fulfils its responsibilities under the Equalities Act 2010.

Suitability of staff, supply staff, and proprietors

The school is committed to employing Christian teachers who are in sympathy with the school's aims and ethos, and to supporting them in the development of their faith. All the required checks on staff for suitability are carried out prior to their appointment and the finance administrator records all of this information in a single central record. This exists in hard copy but has yet to be transferred into electronic

form. At the last inspection, there were some gaps in the recording of the verification of the identity and qualifications for all staff. Since then, the school has worked hard to remedy this deficiency so that it now complies with all the regulations.

Premises of and accommodation at schools

The school occupies a listed building and many outbuildings, which are surrounded by ample and well-maintained grass and woodland, including a forest school. This provides extensive space for outdoor play and sport, and gives good opportunities for learning outside the classroom. The school currently makes excellent use of these facilities to enrich the pupils' experiences and is actively seeking to extend its outdoor curriculum. Recently, the school has received grant aid to fund the renovation of a pond in the grounds where pupils can observe and learn about its eco-system.

Since the last inspection, the premises have been enhanced by the construction of a building housing two new classrooms. In addition, a new, fully equipped ICT suite has been opened and the art room has also been refurbished by parents and friends of the school. The school's accommodation is well maintained with excellent decoration and displays of pupils' work in classrooms and corridors. There is adequate space for pupils to engage safely in learning activities; classrooms are very spacious. Pupils have the use of specialist facilities including those for art, science, PE and cooking, as well as ICT. An additional ramped entrance to the front of The Brook Nursery is now in place improving access to the building and grounds. The school has external lighting to ensure that pupils, parents, staff and visitors can enter and leave the premises safely.

Provision of information

The school's website has most of the required documentation and policies, including safeguarding; it makes clear where and how all other information and policies can be obtained. The website is well presented and easy to navigate. It articulates the school's faith commitment very clearly. The school acknowledges that some aspects need updating especially particulars of academic performance during the preceding school year, including the results of public examinations.

The school uses 'Parentmail' to inform parents about forthcoming events, examination results or any other issues. Parents are kept well informed of the son's or daughter's progress through termly parents' evening or interim reports. There is also a more detailed annual report covering pupils' achievement and effort in the curriculum subjects, as well as their personal, social and spiritual development, in keeping with the aims of the school. Parents are overwhelmingly enthusiastic about and appreciative of what the school is doing for their children. They are extremely pleased with the information provided by the school: as one parent commented, 'Communication is excellent; I feel my views are listened to and welcomed'.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

The school complaints procedure meets all regulations. It endeavours to anticipate and resolve all complaints in a manner which is consistent with its Christian

commitment. There have been two formal complaints in the last year both of which have been resolved.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

The Brook Nursery provides a stimulating and welcoming environment for its pupils so that provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is outstanding. The religious ethos of the school is evident in all that takes place and contributes significantly to each pupil's spiritual and social development. The unique qualities of all pupils are celebrated. They are provided with rich and diverse opportunities to develop their confidence and independent work is carefully planned. Less confident pupils are consistently praised by staff and their efforts applauded so that they become more resilient and secure in their learning in both the Nursery and Reception classes.

Innovative strategies are implemented by staff to help pupils manage their own behaviour, as a result of which difficulties are dealt with very skilfully, contributing to the excellent progress pupils make towards the early learning goals. Teachers sympathetically assist pupils to relate to one another in a positive way and act as excellent role models. As a result, healthy relationships between peers are firmly established. Teachers help pupils resolve conflicts effectively by compassionately and sensitively listening to their concerns and encouraging them to consider one another's feelings. This effective intervention by adults means that pupils are learning to cooperate extremely well and to work together successfully.

A very strong partnership exists between teachers, teaching assistant and parents and carers. Many parents commented that they appreciate the personalised care and attention their children receive and from which they clearly benefit. Parents say that staff are always approachable and quick to respond if required. They feel that their views are listened to and taken into consideration. Parents also appreciate the way in which staff take a genuine interest in the welfare of the pupils' families. As one parent said, 'Staff here are so loving and make my child feel very special because they respond to her individual needs; you feel that they genuinely care'.

All the areas of learning and development in the newly revised EYFS curriculum are comprehensively covered and identified in meticulously planned schemes of work. There is an excellent overall balance between child-initiated and adult-led activities in a wide range of contexts. Pupils enjoy access to all areas of the curriculum and make outstanding progress as a result. All pupils benefit from a diverse range of opportunities for purposeful play, and resources and toys are readily accessible for both indoors and outdoors use. In this respect, the school has made significant progress since the last inspection, and recognition of the school's regionally outstanding improvement of EYFS outdoor play has been made by a recent article in the local authority newsletter. Much of this is due to the drive for continuous improvement that characterises the approach of all the staff in the Nursery and Reception. They regularly audit and monitor the provision, sometimes in conjunction with external agencies, to ensure further progress as part of an ongoing development plan.

The progress of pupils in the Nursery and Reception is assessed regularly and thoroughly through detailed observations by their key workers. Evidence for assessment is based on a mixture of anecdotal records, photographs and targeted activities. The outcome of pupils' initial assessments is used to inform planning and built upon to meet pupils' needs whilst also taking into account their preferred learning styles. On-going assessments are then used to plan future activities so that pupils are able to make progress towards the early learning goals at their own individual rate. The assessments are recorded in pupils' profiles which are available to parents. The cycle of assessment informing next steps in pupils' development is well established, rigorously applied by all staff and effectively monitored by the EYFS leader.

Staff are very well qualified and excellent adult-child ratios allow pupils to receive personalised attention from their key workers. Parents and pupils are informed of their key worker on arrival. The EYFS leader has also introduced a co-worker policy to further enhance this provision which parents greatly appreciate.

The Brook Nursery provides a safe and welcoming environment for parents and their children. All risk assessments and welfare policies are in place ensuring the safe and efficient management of the setting so that the needs of all pupils are met.

The setting meets all the regulations.

As part of its future development, the setting might like to consider:

- devising strategies to challenge the more able pupils in the Reception class as a means of extending their learning.

Compliance with the regulations

The school meets all of the regulations for registration.

The school meets the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

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:

- clarifying and publicising the school's strategic aims through an up-to-date development plan
- reviewing the strategies used to tailor tasks to meet the needs of individual pupils more effectively
- ensuring that marking of pupils' work, especially in the senior school, provides helpful suggestions for their further academic development.