

**St Mary's Catholic Primary School, Isleworth**

**London Borough of Hounslow**

**External Governance Review**

**Sian Mathias, Independent Governance Advisor September 2020**

**FULL REPORT**

Introduction

St Mary's, Isleworth, is a maintained voluntary-aided Catholic primary school in the London Borough of Hounslow. It is a two-form entry school and it was judged 'good' by Ofsted following a short inspection in March 2017.

The reviewer was approached to take on an external governance review in February 2020 and attended a meeting in school on March 4<sup>th</sup> to discuss its scope. The meeting was attended by representatives of the Local Authority (LA) and the Westminster Diocesan Board as well as the headteacher and chair of governors. Concerns had been raised as the Diocesan Board had received several letters from parents and ex- parent governors expressing concerns about some governance decisions at St Mary's. The disquiet stemmed from a period in late 2017 and early 2018 when governors had met with parents to present a proposal to address financial concerns by moving to a four and a half-day school week. This had caused significant dismay amongst a group of parents and a number of letters questioning the leadership and management of the school were sent to the diocese. This was at a time of national concern about school finance and the St Mary's story received national press coverage. The school did not go on to implement the proposal. During this period two parent governors joined the governing board but left soon after stating some dissatisfaction and causing further concern.

The reviewer has no connection with the school or diocese.

The review was originally planned for March 2020 but was delayed until September 2020 by the partial closure of St Mary's during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Scope of review

The review follows the Department for Education (DfE) model and looks at the three core functions of governance and how effectively the board manages its business. The aim of the review has been to identify both the governance strengths and the areas for improvement. It aims to be helpful and collaborative rather than judgmental. The review had been commissioned by the chair and paid for by the governors. It is not a review of the complaints that have been shared with the reviewer but not the school and it is important that these complaints are dealt with following

the school's complaints policy. The head and chair agreed that the review should take into account the views of the ex-parent governors in order that their experiences and concerns could be taken into account.

The review took place during an unprecedented period when schools were having to manage the coronavirus pandemic. St Mary's had introduced appropriate social distancing measures and was welcoming all pupils back to school. This meant that the interviews were conducted by both face to face meetings and virtual ones. The reviewer met with the majority of the governing board, the head teacher, the clerk and two staff members. The reviewer also met with the two parent governors who resigned in April and May 2019.

### **Core function 1 Ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction**

Governors should have a significant role in setting out the vision for the school having taken into account the views of the school's stakeholders. The governance handbook states *"The board should ensure that the organisation has a clear vision – which is articulated in a specific written statement. This should include ambitions for current and future pupils, as well as for the organisation's relationship with other schools. The board should ensure there is a strategy in place for achieving this vision. The strategy should provide a robust framework for setting priorities, creating accountability and monitoring progress in realising the organisation's vision."*

As in the majority of voluntary aided schools, the vision at St Mary's puts the catholic faith as central to its purpose. The vision posted on the school website states:

*'Our school family at St Mary's wants this to be a safe, caring, creative and happy place, where we all have a fair chance to learn and grow together and to do the best we can. We do this by knowing and loving Jesus more every day and by following his teaching in a joyful way'.*

It goes on to say the school aims are:

- a) assist the growth and development of the whole school by encouraging that growth and development in all its members;*
- b) meet each member of the community on their faith journey and help them grow and develop in their relationship with God;*
- c) provide a well-balanced and broad-based curriculum that fulfils the legal requirements placed on it and develops the spiritual, moral, social, emotional, physical and intellectual needs of the individual;*
- d) create an outward looking working community united by our common aim. This includes the pupils, staff, parents, governors, clergy and wider community.*

At interview all governors were clear that a school strength was its focus on supporting the whole child, focusing on the well-being of both children and staff and not focusing exclusively on academic results. This culture is led by the headteacher, but governors supported it and were proud of the school's work to promote good mental health. The school is a member of the Elsa network that trains teaching assistants in emotional literacy support. Although

implied, this strong aspect of the school is not clearly stated in the current vision statement and the statement itself is broad.

The mission document on the St Mary's website states that it was reviewed in 2013, the reviewer understands that the mission and school aims have been discussed since then but this is not reflected in the document on the website. It is good practice to review them regularly (usually bi- annually) to reflect on whether these visions and aims are still appropriate and whether the strategic work of the board and the school development plan reflect them. Current thinking is that a strong vision should take into account all stakeholders views and should focus on the board's ambitions for pupils, not exclusively, but including academic achievement. A school's mission statement has to be published on the school website and it is usually placed on the home page as a clear statement of the culture and ethos of the school.

### **Recommendation 1**

That the board collates the work it has started on listening to parents and staff and then takes some time to review the mission statement to ensure that it is clear and still fit for purpose. It may well be that governors are satisfied but they would want to consider how it reflects the school's strong inclusive ethos, takes into account the views of the school community and puts learning as its core purpose. Once governors are confident that the vision and values in the statement are clear and appropriate these principles should be reflected in all school and board strategic planning.

### **Core function 2: Holding the executive leaders to account for the educational performance of the organisation and its pupils and the effective and efficient performance management of staff**

The current Covid crisis has meant that the majority of children have not been in school for half the school year and the standard key stage assessments have been cancelled. This has meant that the availability of data and evidence of progress and attainment are inevitably limited in this exceptional year

However, at interview governors were able to recall the strategies the school had adopted to improve assessment (PiXL) and the teaching and progress in maths (Maths mastery). Governors were confident that maths had improved across the school and parent governors had seen an improvement in their children's engagement with the subject.

Governors were generally able to recall the Ofsted inspection improvement priorities from the 2017 short inspection. These were ensuring that middle-attaining pupils at key stage 1 are consistently challenged to develop their writing skills across a range of subjects and the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and those receiving special educational needs support remains a priority so that it is at least in line with the national average. Governors were generally confident that the work to address these areas is good. St Mary's benefits from the education and SEND expertise amongst the governing board membership.

The reviewer was confident that the evidence that governors received regarding pupil progress was thorough and sound. It was also clear from the minutes of the achievement and standards committee that governors had the knowledge needed to challenge the school leadership and that meetings were appropriately probing. Governors do not have direct governor access to analysing school performance (ASP) and they may wish to ask for this, but they are provided with its contents in some detail. In 2019 the school's performance scores across the subjects was graded as average (Compare School Performance Service Gov.UK) and governors need to remain diligent to ensure that all pupils make good or better progress.

The reviewer has seen the evaluation and school improvement evidence shared with governors: the school development plan (SDP) as published on the school website; the review of progress for the SDP 2018 – 2019; the graded SEF for autumn 2019 and spring 2020 and the Hounslow Education Partnership (HEP) peer challenge report. These documents give governors good evidence of the school improvement priorities and progress against them. The school development plan on the website lists areas under the four Ofsted criteria and governors were aware particularly of the focus on reading, curriculum development and improving progress and attendance for disadvantaged and SEND pupils.

## **Recommendation 2**

The governing board is in the process of preparing a governance strategy document that will guide and inform their work. It is suggested that this is completed alongside the review of the 2019 – 2020 School Development Plan (SDP) and the signing off of the new SDP for 2020 – 2021. The governance plan should reflect the key development areas and the wider risks the school is likely to face. These might include; continuing to build positive relationships with stakeholders, promotion of the school with the aim of supporting admission numbers, implementation of the new curriculum and the support for pupil's mental health and return to learning post lockdown.

### Performance management

The performance management of the head is led by a panel of three senior governors and is supported by an external advisor. The head's targets are linked to those in the school development plan and progress against them is reviewed mid-year. These targets then inform the performance management of the staff team. The Pay and Performance committee review and agree the staff appraisal policy and pay recommendations based on performance. St Mary's was the first school in Hounslow to receive the Workload Charter Mark.

### **Core function 3: Overseeing the financial performance of the school and making sure money is well spent.**

The financial management of the school was the cause of some turmoil with a group of parents challenging the proposal to move to a four and half day week to save money and balance a stretched budget. This proposal was not enacted. Two parents joined as parent governors following this period and then went on to resign quoting concerns and frustrations with the finance committee. This was early in 2019 and the reviewer saw evidence of significant improvement since then. The school outsources its finance function to LMS Ltd and the individual responsible for St Mary's now regularly attends finance committee meetings. Governors have re-negotiated the model for finance

reporting to give them clearer and appropriate information. The Schools Financial Value Standard (SFVS) is properly scrutinised and informed and the whole governing board was offered finance training which seven governors attended. There is also evidence of sound financial benchmarking against similar local schools.

St Mary's three-year budget plan shows the school in a more secure financial place with carry forwards for the next two years.

#### Sundry's fund

The sundry's fund was set up in April 2018 for voluntary parental contributions that were used to purchase curriculum resources. The suggested contribution was increased from £60 to £150 in 2019. Now that the school is on a better financial footing the fund has been suspended. This decision was taken as the fund had achieved its purpose and in light of the pandemic's economic impact on parents.

#### Pupil numbers

Governors are aware of the impact of pupil numbers on the school's budget. Governors have made some changes to the admissions policy to support increasing the number of pupils. The school however is currently losing pupils and numbers have decreased for the past two years. There are a few vacancies in nursery and reception and a slow trickle of pupils leaving further up the school because they are moving away from the area or because they are moving to a local very popular school. There have also been some new children joining since the start of the new academic year. There are some demographic challenges in the local area with numbers of reception children declining and the pandemic encouraging families to move. This makes it particularly important that governors have a strategy to promote the school and to ensure good news messages get out to the local community.

### **Recommendation 3**

That school management and those responsible for governance take the opportunity to consider how to promote the school locally with a view to increasing pupil numbers.

#### Pupil premium

The extra funding to support disadvantaged pupils is relatively small (£40,046 in 2019 – 2020) the bulk of which is spent on small group support. Governors will want to assure themselves that the funding is directed at the targeted group of children. Pupil premium funding is reported on the website as required.

### **Core Area 4: Effective Governance Practice**

St Mary's governors know their school well. They are regular visitors to school, they make purposeful visits, report back and staff appreciate their knowledge and interest. They are less visible to parents, however. Relationships with a minority of parents had deteriorated during the shorter week consultation and had been further impacted by decisions about homework, parent's rights to take photographs and increasing the sundry's fund. Governors recognise the need to build trust and improve communication to ensure that all parent opinions are heard. A parent

survey was on-going at the time of the review but it appeared to be showing a higher level of concern than average from a small group of parents which governors will want to take into account when making key decisions.

One of the unexpected outcomes of the partial lockdown of the school has been to improve the relationship with parents through providing regular updates, home learning and phone calls. As so much had to be communicated the systems were streamlined to focus on Parent Hub only and this app links to the school website. The teachers interviewed were confident that they had developed better relationships with parents over lockdown.

The headteacher had established a parent focus group and there is a new elected parent with a parental links responsibility who has good knowledge of the school parent community. There are plenty of positive messages to share with parents. The reviewer has seen the Hounslow Learning Partnership Quality Assurance Report and Peer Challenge Report which have many positive messages about the good work at the school. The reviewer understands that these have been shared with parents but governors will want to consider how to continue to get the key messages across. As part of this process they may want to review the school website to ensure that it is effective at giving positive messages about the school and is easy for parents to navigate.

Governors will also want to ensure that the parent focus group gets established again once social distancing rules are relaxed and will want to consider how it demonstrates that it is listening to key messages and parental feedback.

#### **Recommendation 4**

That governors agree to increase their visibility to parents by including pen portraits and photographs on the school website and on the wall in reception and by ensuring that, when governors attend school events and celebrations, they signal who they are. They may also wish to consider short informative governor pieces in school newsletters.

#### Governor skills and training

Governors have reviewed the skills on the board by completing a skills audit and all governors have signed a code of conduct as is good practice. The board has a good balance of experienced and newer members. The board is already benefitting from the recent appointment of two new parent governors with helpful skills and experience. The governing board will want to refer to the skills audit when it approaches the Diocesan Board for support with filling the one foundation governor vacancy. All governors the reviewer spoke to had completed training during the last year, including whole governing board training (self- evaluation and finance for governors). Governors regularly attend diocesan and local authority training including induction for new governors.

#### Chairing

The current chair has been in post for two years and is well respected by governor colleagues and the staff the reviewer interviewed. Staff appreciated his regular visits into school, in particular his genuine interest in their roles and opinions. The board does not have a succession plan in place for the role of chair or the chairs of committees and it is good practice to ensure that succession planning remains on the governing board planning agenda.

### Clerking

The governing board has benefitted from employing an experienced clerk who ensures proper process and offers sound advice. The organisational support for the board is strong and minutes produced detail support and challenge by governors. The clerk has a good professional relationship with the head and chair and is regularly used as a sounding board.

### Management of complaints

The Diocese's role is one of advisor and it offers its schools a model complaints policy based on law and DfE guidance. The school publishes the Diocesan model policy on the school's website but it is not given a school heading and has not been adapted to fit the school circumstances. Paragraphs refer to academies and opportunities to add the school name have not been taken. It is understandable that parents may mistakenly think that they should complain to the Diocese, particularly if they do not read the substance of a long policy. Governors may wish to consider giving the policy the school branding whilst acknowledging the Diocese input and putting a simple flow chart showing the ladder of how complaints are handled namely: headteacher; chair of governors; governor complaints panel; secretary of state.

The governing board and school leadership has had a challenging couple of years but the reviewer saw significant evidence of improvement and review: more effective financial systems and reporting, the start of a strategy to work more positively with parents, strong new parent governors with good links in the school and church community; whole governing board training and a developing whole GB strategy for continual improvement.

The reviewer would like to thank the governors and staff at St Mary's for their welcome and full cooperation during the review.

Sian Mathias, Independent Governance Advisor

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