Getting Started in Schools
“Getting Started in Schools” written by Kathryn Kane, Mary Kok, Alex Taylor and produced by Capital Youth on behalf of the Diocese of London.

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Foreword

Spending time with young people is a privilege, wherever you meet them. In schools, we see passions ignited and fuelled, futures debated, and directions set, so it is a great privilege to play a part in school life. Whether a young person is flying high or they are struggling, churches and Christians can play a huge role in supporting the students and staff of their local schools.

I recently led a team of youth workers, ordinands and clergy on a mission to five secondary schools in the Kensington Area. I saw first-hand the dedication of the staff who worked to inspire and equip their students. I was able to share in young peoples’ triumphs, sit with them in their difficulties and try to answer their questions about life and faith.

It was inspiring to see the love and support shown to the people in these schools each day by those on the mission team.

We can all play an active role in the lives of our local secondary schools; starting with prayer for them and working with them to provide the support they need. The ideas in this booklet were inspired by the success, lessons learned and feedback from the Kensington Mission – I hope they are useful to you in building relationships with the staff and young people in your local school.

Rt Revd Graham Tomlin
Bishop of Kensington
Why work in schools?

Even if you have a large and thriving youth ministry at your church, you might be forgiven for looking around and wondering where all the young people are. The sad fact is that 95% of children and young people have no regular contact with the church (Peter Brierley, UK Church Statistics 2, 2010–2020, ADBC Publishers 2014). For many, their family’s last experience of Christianity might be two or three generations ago.

However, while this is a saddening statistic, it does provide a wide mission field for churches to reach young people with a millennia-old, brand new message – the message of the good news of Jesus Christ! And where can you guarantee that the overwhelming majority of young people will be each day? In school.

Secondary schools can be confusing places. Depending on how old you are, a secondary school may have changed beyond all recognition from when you were a pupil. Nevertheless, churches and Christians have a great deal to offer a school community in terms of pastoral support, supporting Christians already in school and helping to fulfil the school’s RE, PSHE or citizenship commitments.

But you can’t just career into your local school, waving the Bible and shouting about the love of Jesus. There’s a lot of groundwork that needs to be done first. Without an existing relationship with the school, the doors are going to remain firmly closed to you. And without a clear, long-term strategy, if you do get through the doors, you’re likely to make yourself (and those who come after you) quite unwelcome.

Conversely, gradually building up a relationship between the church and the school is likely to lead trust growing between the two, and to increasing opportunities to support the school, its students and staff. And it is this trust that’s key to working in schools.

This leads us to a difficult question. Of course, we want young people and staff to meet Jesus and understand what he has done for them. Yet, this is not appropriate for a school context. Any school will be rightly resistant to a church coming in and pushes faith in inappropriate ways or tries to convert young people while hoping the school doesn’t realise what they’re doing.
Steve Whyatt and Rachel Foster are both experienced schools’ workers. “Be sensitive and appropriate when you explain Christianity and talk about your faith,” says Rachel, “understanding that it is not our place to tell anyone what to think or believe.” There’s a wider recognition and awareness that schools are places of education and not proclamation, so therefore the question of integrity is raised,” adds Steve. “My take is that it’s important that we don’t end up saying one thing to schools about our aims and another to our church!”

Whatever we do in schools, we must be honest and open about why we are there and what we want to do. It’s essential to be part of the ongoing story of the school. Schools’ work is a long-term project – it’s not enough to do one thing and never go back. If we start something in a school and abandon it after only a short time, we let the school down and lose all credibility. **Consistency is key.**

“It’s important that we don’t end up saying one thing to schools about our aims and another to our church!”
Getting started

You want to support your local school, but where do you start? First (and this might seem obvious), find out where your local school is. You might have more than one school in your parish, you might not have any. So, which one are you going to start supporting. If you have more than one school, don’t try to do too much at once. At this early stage, you’re unlikely to have many resources (either volunteers or material resources) so you’ll need to marshal things carefully.

Find out what other churches or schools’ work trusts are doing. It might be that there are already church workers or specialist Christian schools’ workers visiting the school. In which case, can you partner with those already working in the school?

You’re not going to look very competent if you approach a school only to be told that local Christians are already involved (whether you knew about them or not). However, approaching those who are already working with the school and offering to help is a good place to start. They can include you in the ongoing work and you’ll start to build a relationship with the school. Once trust has been built, you can start to develop other ways of support that complement whatever is going on.

If no one is currently working with the school, has anyone visited there in the past. If that went well, the school may be warm to new Christian visitors now. If it didn’t, then you will have to do more work reassuring the school that you won’t make the same mistakes as the previous visitor.

You might have a contact who can introduce you to the relevant people. This could be a Christian teacher, a chaplain or someone from your church community who works there. Ask them to introduce you to the head teacher, deputy head or member of staff responsible for the pastoral care of the students. In this way, you can start your approach from a place of recommendation.

If you don’t have any contacts in the school, then you will need to make an
approach to the head teacher cold. However, this doesn’t mean you’ll be unsuccessful! Remember though that first impressions count. When you email or call the school, keep your language professional and appropriate. Being unprofessional or too informal will diminish the recipient’s view of who you are and how you might support them.

Don’t go in with an agenda – saying that you’d like to do this or that will mean a head teacher may discount your approach if they don’t want those specific activities in school or if someone else is already providing them (or if they think you’re overbearing and have your own objectives). Have some suggestions of what might offer ready, but listen carefully to what the school needs.

Mary Kok organised a multi-school mission in Kensington in 2018: “For a school having outsiders come in is both a joy and a risk,” she says. “Be prepared for lots of questions and to give an account of what you can offer. Dressing professionally for meetings with the school is a must.”

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Martyn Skinner is CEO of Aspire Multi-Academy Trust: “For me, it boils down to the manner of the person as they make contact. Often it’s a straightforward as someone ringing up and asking to chat to the head teacher, and just seeing if they can say hi and introduce themselves. The people who do it well do it in a low-key way.”

Rather than approaching a school with a list of what we want to do, we should make contact humbly, with care and respect. “A phone call like, ‘Hi, I’m part of the local church. Since we serve the same community, I’d really love to come and introduce myself’ can be a really effective,” says Martyn. We are there to serve the school and not to push our own agenda. As you chat with the head teacher or person responsible, it’s important to listen to what is being said. Ask yourself ‘Where’s the need?’ The circumstances of each school are unique, so what is needed in one school may not be what is needed in another.
After the initial contact, even if you have had someone to introduce to the right people, you might have to wait. It may be that the head teacher doesn’t have the time to consider your offer of help and support; the opportunities for you to support the school might not be there at the time you make your approach. However, when the time is right, the school might well get back to you with an idea of what you can get involved with.

**What can you offer?**

You might have a whole range of things you’d like to do with the school (see some of the suggestions over the next few pages), but it’s important to be led by what the school needs. Once you have started to build trust, you can begin to help address some of the issues the school needs assistance with. Much of what you can support schools with is linked to each school’s requirement to promote Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural development (SMSC). This provision is usually spread across a range of school activities. Ofsted measures this as part of their inspections and defines SMCS as shown in the four boxes below and overleaf.

Helping schools promote SMCS development played a large part in the Kensington schools’ missions: “Schools are open to opportunities that will help towards the SMSC

### Spiritual development

of pupils is shown by their:

- ability to be reflective about their own beliefs, religious or otherwise, that inform their perspective on life and their interest in and respect for different people’s faiths, feelings and values
- sense of enjoyment and fascination in learning about themselves, others and the world around them
- use of imagination and creativity in their learning
- willingness to reflect on their experiences.

### Moral development

of pupils is shown by their:

- ability to recognise the difference between right and wrong and to readily apply this understanding in their own lives, recognise legal boundaries and, in so doing, respect the civil and criminal law of England
- understanding of the consequences of their behaviour and actions
- interest in investigating and offering reasoned views about moral and ethical issues and ability to understand and appreciate the viewpoints of others on these issues.
goals,” explains Mary. “This is a valuable opportunity for us to share what we believe and our experiences of faith. It also gives us opportunity to provide space for students to reflect on their lives, and the big issues of life. We can take the role of helping students to question and wonder.”

Schools will also have their own goals to achieve, over and above SMCS development, depending on their socio-economic context. They are also encouraged to engage in their local community. All of which will help build the relationship with the school.

You may be asked to help with the formal curriculum, for example RE or citizenship. In which case, you’ll need to work closely with the class teacher to deliver a lesson that fits what they require. The following pages explore some of the other ways you can support the school outside the curriculum.

Church of England schools are subject to Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS), focusing on the impact of the school’s Christian vision on pupils and adults.

Local church involvement is a key contributor to success in the seven strands which make up inspectors’ evaluation.

Below: Taken from The School Inspection Handbook (Ofsted, Nov 2019).

**Social development**

of pupils is shown by their:

- use of a range of social skills in different contexts, for example working and socialising with other pupils, including those from different religious, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds
- willingness to participate in a variety of communities and social settings, including by volunteering, cooperating well with others and being able to resolve conflicts effectively
- acceptance and engagement with the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs; they develop and demonstrate skills and attitudes that will allow them to participate fully in and contribute positively to life in modern Britain.

**Cultural development**

- understanding and appreciation of the range of cultural influences that shaped their own heritage and of others
- understanding and appreciation of the different cultures within school and further afield as an essential element of their preparation for life in modern Britain
- knowledge of Britain’s democratic parliamentary system and its central role in shaping our history and values, and in continuing to develop Britain
- willingness to participate in and respond positively to artistic, musical, sporting and cultural opportunities
- interest in exploring, improving understanding of and showing respect for different faiths and cultural diversity and the extent to which they understand, accept, respect and celebrate it, as shown by their tolerance and attitudes towards different groups in local, national and global communities.
Assemblies

A well-presented assembly (or series of them) can be a key element in building up trust and relationships with staff and students. They can be a stepping stone to being invited to contribute more to the life of a school.

Assemblies are probably the most basic element of what you can offer (or be asked to do). Schools are required to provide acts of worship: in Anglican schools, this must be Christian worship; in state schools the act of worship must be broadly Christian in nature. If you’re offered an assembly, there are various ways to go about it.

First, decide your aim. You may be asked to take an assembly on a certain theme, as part of a series the school is running. In this case, you’ll need to stick closely to what the school has asked you to do. If you’re given a free choice, you can decide yourself what your aim is.

You might want to present and share your faith with young people; you might wish to promote SMCS development; you could aim to present a positive image of the Christian faith. The SIAMS framework says that collective worship should be inclusive, invitational and inspiring, so have those qualities in your mind as you plan.

What you choose will depend on your relationship with the school. An assembly that comes at the start of your relationship might have to be more ‘restrained’ than one when the school trusts you more. That’s more restrained in terms of resources used and games played (a school won’t be pleased if you make a large mess or get the young people worked up), and in the message (deliver an explicitly Christian message at the start if your relationship and you’re unlikely to be asked back).

It might be worth your while going to watch some assemblies, before you deliver your first one. Look at the tone and pitch of the assembly. Try to get a feel of the physical space and the values that are being promoted through the words and method of delivery.

Once you have built up trust and your relationship with the school is strong, they will be happier for you to explore ideas of faith in a more personal framework. Never presume to speak
on behalf of all Christians, acknowledge the variety of denomination and belief. Chat to the staff beforehand if you’re unsure about what you’re aiming to present. It is always good practice to share the content of your assembly with the person you are liaising with at least a few days before you are due to do the assembly. As mentioned earlier, it’s not our place to tell people what to believe and schools are not places of faith proclamation. Choose your words carefully!

It’s important too to get all the practical details sorted before you plan your assembly. Knowing simple things such as what time the assembly is, how long it is and what the age group of the young people is might sound obvious, but getting one of those things wrong is likely to put your relationship in jeopardy. Turning up late, not sticking to the dress code, running over (or under) time or pitching the material at the wrong age tells the school that you’re unprofessional or don’t care enough about the students.

Don’t rely too heavily on IT – be prepared to be able to do an assembly without a PowerPoint, YouTube clips or other streamed content. School IT systems are very often unreliable.

**Improving your game**

Once you’ve delivered your assembly, ask for feedback from your contact. Decide together what went well and what things could be improved. Accept any criticism and, when you return for your next visit, demonstrate that you have worked on it. We’re unlikely to get things completely right first time around, so reviewing an assembly is vital to contributing the best we can to the life of the school.
Prayer Spaces

A prayer space is a place where young people of all faiths and none can explore life questions, faith and spirituality in a safe, creative environment. A prayer space starts off from a Christian perspective but allows students to explore prayer and self-reflection from a viewpoint they are comfortable.

A prayer space might look like a classroom or similar-sized space, which has been set up with a range of creative ways to explore prayer and provide time for personal reflection. Often, young people interacting with the space have never considered the idea of prayer as a way of processing life issues.

The activities in a prayer space provide a way for students to choose to engage, reflect and respond in a way in which they feel comfortable.

*Prayer Spaces in Schools* is a resource hub with a wealth of ideas and activities available on its website (prayerspacesinschools.com). It also organises regular training events to help and inspire church staff, schools’ workers and volunteers to set up prayer spaces in their local school.

As part of the Kensington missions, a prayer space was set up in each school visited. All the different prayer activities fitted around the central theme of living life in all its fullness.
During the mission, classes were given the chance to enter the space – half the class experienced the space while the other half had a lesson about Christian Prayer, with the two halves swapping over halfway through the lesson. There were two supervisors in the space at all times, helping students to engage and drawing together reflections at the end of the experience.

Each student was allowed to engage at their own pace. However, some groups needed more supervision than others. When needed volunteers went around the prayer space with students to complete activities (for example, those who struggled to read needed help in understanding what to do at each station).

The team found that briefing the students about what to expect from the prayer space before they entered in to the space was best. Each prayer space volunteer then took students in two at a time, got them started on an activity and then fetched another two students. This kept the environment reflective as students did not run in and get excited about what they saw before they knew what was expected of them in the environment.

The positive outcomes of running these spaces were many. It stimulated students who were creative, natural reflectors and kinaesthetic learners. It encouraged those who find it hard to be reflective to think about different aspects of life. It brought stillness into an environment where stillness is rare and Christians got to share their testimonies of answered prayers.

One of the few downsides of the prayer space was that there was no way to know the real impact on individual students. This made it impossible to follow those students up who may have had a very real experience of God in the prayer space.

Staff as well as students engaged with the space and feedback from teachers was overwhelmingly positive, with one RE teacher commenting: “Really liked the reflective visits. Lots of student discussion, room for reflection and creative ways to pray in the chapel.”

Once your relationship with a school has grown a little, you could offer to run prayer space for a few days or a week, fitting in with many of Ofsted’s measurements on SMCS development.
Schools are often looking for people to run clubs – breakfast clubs, lunchtime clubs or those that run after school. As has been a constant refrain so far in this booklet, initially you’ll need to listen closely to what the school needs. Do you have the volunteers available at an early hour to run a breakfast club if the school wants one? Are you able to come into school at lunchtime to run a club for those who find being outside with other students a problem? When you’re starting out, what the school needs is more important than any ideas you might come in with. Long-term commitment is key.

**Breakfast clubs**

Between 2014 and 2017, the Department of Education carried out some research into a programme which aimed to set up sustainable breakfast clubs in a range of schools, particularly in schools with high levels of deprivation. This research showed that breakfast clubs were able to combat hunger, improve poor punctuality and head off difficult behaviour before it became an issue.

The research also found that breakfast clubs promoted social development, and improved attention and engagement in learning.

Setting up and running breakfast club in a secondary school can be quite an undertaking. While in a primary school, a breakfast club can be open to all, this would be impractical for most secondary school clubs. Unless you are a particularly large church community, you will need to work in partnership with the school, other churches in the catchment area and perhaps even a schools’ work trust.

*This Department of Education paper is a good place to start when planning a breakfast club:* [www.gov.uk/government/publications/breakfast-clubs-in-high-deprivation-schools](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/breakfast-clubs-in-high-deprivation-schools)
Help the school identify why a breakfast club would be a good thing and who they want to aim it at. For example, if the aim of the club is to improve poor punctuality, you might want to target those who are persistently late for school and encourage them to attend.

There are other considerations, such as what food you’ll provide, who will pay for it or where it will be. Does the school have catering facilities and are you allowed to use them? There is a lot to think about, but the benefit to the school can be enormous.

If a breakfast club isn’t a possibility (or needed), you could offer a lunch club at your church that runs during school holidays for those students who would usually be eligible for free school meals at school during term times. This will provide much-needed help to families that struggle to provide enough food when free school meals are not available.

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**Christian Unions (or similar)**

Christian Unions used to be common in secondary schools, but are not such a regular occurrence these days. This is probably because there are fewer (public) Christians, but also because staff have less time to help organise a club.

There will probably be Christian young people who would be eager to lead a club, but a helping hand from a church will give them the confidence needed to start the process.

These young people might well be in your church (or a neighbouring congregation). Identify any young people who would be interested in setting up a club and gather together with the staff member responsible for the pastoral care of the school to agree what you’re going to do. This will ensure that you get the school’s buy-in up front and the young people feel supported in their venture.

Sort out a venue, a suitable time for the club (lunchtime or after-school), what you’re going to explore in each session and how you’re going to publicise it. You could help young people arrange for visitors to come and speak, or give them some informal training in running a session. A Christian club like this is a great way to support Christians in the school and provide space for them to see their faith in action.
Third Space Ministry

It is also worth considering a ‘third space’ ministry in your conversations with the school. A model explored by Amy Tolmie at the youth work charity Youthscape, the aim is to create spaces for young people to engage inside the school grounds outside of formal assemblies, lessons or clubs. A ‘third space’ could be an exhibition in an atrium, or an installation based in an outdoor area.

After-school clubs

Many parents and carers struggle with childcare around the school day. Yet, after-school club provision at secondary school is less formalised than at primary school, but there are range of options to think about. Schools might already run special interest clubs, such as sports or performing arts – you might be able to become a part of those, particularly if you have specific skills to offer. If not, is there something that you can offer the school in terms of a specialist skill?

A homework club could be appropriate for your local school. It provides a space for young people to do homework in a supportive environment without any distractions – something that some might lack in their home situation. You don’t need to be an expert in whatever subject the young people are studying, just be supportive and facilitate a space for the young people to work. It might be an idea to provide some refreshments, and the school may well provide a classroom to hold the club. Remember, a club doesn’t have to be on the school premises to benefit the school and its students.

You can purchase Amy’s book, Third Space Schools’ Ministry, directly from Youthscape’s website: youthscape.co.uk/store/product/third-space
St Christopher’s Church in Springfield, Birmingham runs an after-school drop-in for the young people who attend the local secondary school. A club focused on games, karaoke and chat has led to more faith-based discussions and community social action. The local school has recognised the benefit of the club and have started to support it, offering their AstroTurf pitch free of charge for the church to start a football club.

Thanks for reading!

We hope you’ve found the advice in this booklet helpful – there’s more to come! Capital Youth is making a suite of resources containing lessons learned and valuable advice from those working with young people in the Diocese of London.

Find out more and download more resources from Capital Youth at london.anglican.org/youth or get in touch with us at youth@london.anglican.org

If your church or school is in the Diocese of London, feel free to email Kathryn Kane directly at kathryn.kane@london.anglican.org