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5 July 2012

Mr I Smith
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Smith

Special measures: monitoring inspection of St Benedict's Catholic High School

Following my visit with Peter Bannon, Additional Inspector, and Jim Bennetts, Additional Inspector, to your school on 3 and 4 July 2012, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

This was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place on 27 and 28 February 2012. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Newly Qualified Teachers may not be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Cumbria and the Director of Education for the Diocese of Lancaster.

Yours sincerely

Shirley Gornall
Her Majesty's Inspector

January 2012



Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in February 2012

- Increase the amount of good or better teaching so that attainment rises and progress accelerates for all groups of students, especially in English and mathematics, by:
 - using assessment information to plan learning activities that specifically match the needs and potential of every student in the class
 - providing stimulating learning experiences and environments that will fully engage students, increase the value they place on their education and improve behaviour within their classroom.

- Develop leadership and management at all levels to ensure more rapid and sustainable school improvement by:
 - making more frequent and better use of data to evaluate all aspects of the school's effectiveness and to inform future planning
 - strengthening quality assurance procedures in order to drive improvements at a faster pace
 - increasing the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements in preventing bullying and harassment.

- Improve the behaviour and safety of students by:
 - improving the management of behaviour in lessons so that learning is not interrupted
 - acting as a matter of urgency to ensure that all students feel free from harassment and bullying and are confident that any concerns they have will be acted on quickly and effectively by the school
 - ensuring attendance continues to improve and does not fall below the national average.

Special measures: monitoring inspection of St Benedict's Catholic High School

Report from the monitoring inspection on 3 and 4 July 2012

Evidence

During the monitoring inspection, inspectors scrutinised a range of documents and examined students' work in lessons and in their books. Twenty seven lessons were seen, of which five were joint observations with members of the school's senior leadership team. Meetings were held with the executive headteacher, senior and middle leaders, members of staff, the student council, the Chair of the Governing Body, two representatives from the local authority, an adviser to the governing body, staff who have provided school-to-school support and representatives from the diocese. An assembly and two tutorials were observed and informal discussions were held with students around the school and at social times.

Context

Significant changes have occurred since the school was judged to require special measures. The headteacher resigned and an executive headteacher took over the leadership of the school in May 2012 on an interim basis. He is the substantive headteacher of a good school within the local authority. An extensive programme of school-to-school support has been provided. Several members of staff have left their posts. Recent new appointments include subject leaders for English and mathematics.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Attainment is beginning to rise in response to the school's concerted focus on securing better progress for all students. The school's predicted performance for 2012 shows improvement from results secured in 2011 in terms of the proportion of students gaining five good GCSE qualifications, including English and mathematics. However, despite this increase, the school's performance in 2012 is still likely to fall short of its target. Students' progress from their relative starting points to the end of Key Stage 4 remains lower than that found nationally. School leaders and teachers are now much better equipped with accurate, accessible data that presents a clear picture of underachievement over time. They are working hard to identify gaps in students' skills and knowledge and are adjusting their teaching to ensure that progress is beginning to accelerate.

The progress made by students with special educational needs is variable; it is most effective when adult support is well-deployed to promote students' independence, as was observed in a physical education lesson, or when tasks are arranged into an interesting sequence of engaging activities, such as seen in modern foreign languages.

The school's leaders recognise that there is variability in how effectively teachers support students with special educational needs. They have planned changes to bring about a more

consistent approach to monitoring provision and outcomes for these students. The achievement of higher attaining students is effectively promoted in lessons that challenge students to think for themselves and apply their skills in interesting contexts. Older students are increasingly aware of how they need to improve their work to secure the best possible grades.

Achievement is rising in both English and mathematics as a result of more focused teaching and recognition of students' prior attainment. Inspection evidence suggests that achievement is weaker in science where expectations are sometimes too low and staffing has been disrupted, leading to inconsistent experiences that have frustrated students and contributed to some low-level disruption in lessons.

The quality of teaching

Teaching has improved since the previous inspection. A more consistent approach has been adopted to lesson planning. There is effective linkage between the elements teachers consider in their planning and the school's quality assurance criteria. This has enabled a shared understanding of how progress is promoted and has increased recognition among students that every lesson is an important learning opportunity. The environment in some classrooms has been developed to include examples of students' work that celebrate achievement and serve as a reference point. Displays are particularly stimulating in history. In some areas of the school, classrooms are poorly maintained and insufficient attention is paid to displaying students' current work as a learning resource.

In the best lessons, students are engaged and interested in their work. Teachers' questioning is often insightful and thought-provoking. In a very effective English lesson, students' spiritual understanding was stimulated through their exploration of symbolism and visual imagery in a short film. Teachers are gaining confidence to provide more varied learning opportunities for students. For example, in an outstanding information and communication technology lesson the teacher carefully planned opportunities that enabled students to consolidate their learning by teaching their peers, an experience they clearly enjoyed.

In less effective lessons, there is a tendency for learning to be slower-paced and for opportunities to be missed to extend students' thinking. Sometimes teachers provide instructions or explanations that are too lengthy and restrict opportunities for students to work independently. Students are sometimes reticent when required to give verbal answers in class and some teachers find difficulty in helping them to articulate their thoughts fully.

Students recognise that their teachers now make lesson objectives clear and take more opportunities to assess their learning during lessons. They consider that teachers' marking is generally helpful. Inspectors found marking to be regular and comments to provide an effective balance of praise and suggestions for improvement. There is, however, inconsistency in how students respond to their teachers' advice, particularly with regard to improving their literacy skills.

Inadequate teaching has largely been eradicated through strengthened performance management and effective continuing professional development. The school's senior leaders are aware of those staff who require additional support and challenge and are addressing their needs effectively through a programme of intensive school-to-school support. The school is aware that science teaching does not promote good progress over time, partly because of low expectations in the scheme of work.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection on the areas for improvement:

- increase the amount of good or better teaching so that attainment rises and progress accelerates for all groups of students, especially in English and mathematics – satisfactory

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The school has continued to improve students' attendance. Intensive work has been undertaken, including through the involvement of parents and carers, to raise students' awareness of bullying and ensure that there is a consistent response to any incidents. Students are adamant that the school is a safe place and that bullying in any form, including homophobic bullying, is not tolerated. They have confidence in the school's pastoral system and feel that they have trusted adults to turn to if they have problems. They are also confident in their own abilities to care for each other as members of the school community. Inspectors observed respectful and compliant behaviour in most lessons. Students report that there is some low-level disruption in lessons where they are less engaged in their learning. A new behaviour management system has been developed that rewards positive attitudes and promotes good behaviour for learning. Students welcome this change of approach. There has been a relatively high level of fixed-term exclusions of Year 11 students since the previous inspection. Few students in other year groups have been excluded. Plans have been completed for the school's internal exclusion facility to be discontinued and additional support to be provided in order that any instances of disruptive behaviour can be managed in class without detriment to students' learning. The school's monitoring of behaviour has improved.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection on the areas for improvement:

- improve the behaviour and safety of students – satisfactory

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The executive headteacher has brought about significant, necessary change in a short time. His meticulous evaluation of performance has resulted in prompt, decisive and effective action. He has quickly identified key weaknesses and developed processes and systems that enable the school to take action to improve provision and raise standards. A new staffing structure has been developed within which the roles of senior leaders and middle leaders have been reconfigured to embed a shared focus on achievement. Students' performance data are better understood by staff who are now able to track progress and recognise

underachievement. There is a shared understanding and acceptance of the urgency of the school's improvement agenda.

Quality assurance processes have been developed that are rigorous and robust. Senior leaders have been coached to make clear judgements about the quality of teaching and learning and to provide colleagues with developmental feedback. Subject leaders are increasingly held accountable for the performance of their departments, although there is still variability in their effectiveness. Some middle leaders are very new to post and so it is not possible as yet to judge their impact.

Governance has been strengthened, including through the appointment of a new Chair of the Governing Body who has considerable experience and understanding of school improvement. The ability of the members of the governing body to provide challenge and support has been developed with advisory support. Leaders, including the governing body, monitor safeguarding assiduously.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection on the areas for improvement:

- develop leadership and management at all levels to ensure more rapid and sustainable school improvement – good

External support

The local authority's statement of action has been judged fit for purpose. Effective local authority support has been provided to improve teaching and learning in mathematics and to manage staffing issues. A local authority adviser chairs a monitoring group that steers improvement. Financial support from the local authority has enabled the release of staff from the partner school.

The support provided by Millom High School is exceptionally good. The headteacher supported the school initially as a Local Leader of Education, brokered by the National College, and latterly as St Benedict's executive headteacher. The Chair of the Governing Body from Millom supports the governors at St Benedict's in an advisory capacity. Key developments in the strategic use of data and in coaching for improvement have been led by senior leaders from Millom. Their support is greatly appreciated by staff whose skills have developed strongly in response to this intervention.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve teaching, develop the curriculum and raise attainment in science.