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Elaine Heaphy
Headteacher
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CM18 6AA

Dear Ms Heaphy

Notice to improve: monitoring inspection of St Mark's West Essex Catholic School

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 24 October 2012 and for the information which you provided during the inspection. Please pass on my thanks to the Chair of the Governing Body for finding the time to join the discussions and to your pupils for their courtesy.

Under the sponsorship of the Diocese of Brentwood academy status was achieved before the last inspection. However, the governing body has chosen to retain the current school name. A total of 24 staff, including 18 full time equivalent teaching staff, 50% of whom retired, left the school in July 2012. Two assistant headteachers, a new head of geography and nine experienced teachers, along with three newly qualified teachers, took up their posts on 1 September 2012.

As a result of the inspection on 7 March 2012, the school was asked to address the most important areas for improvement which are set out in the annex to this letter.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making **satisfactory** progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the pupils' achievement.

The 2012 unvalidated A level and GCSE examination results are better than the school achieved in 2011. Although standards have risen notably, the proportion of students making the expected progress does not exceed the national average and requires improvement.

Results at A level were close to the national average in nearly a third of the subjects such as history, and design and technology, but remain below average in too many

subjects, for example, mathematics and science. The progress made by students from GCSE to A level qualifications also showed improvement as a result of better sixth form teaching. Overall, the educational value added in the sixth form is close to the national figure, although variations occur in all types of qualifications. For example, business studies applied A level results showed notable improvement and many students made good progress, but results in health and social care at the same level were below average and students underachieved.

In 2012, the proportion of students securing five higher-grade GCSE passes, including English and mathematics, is likely to be just above the national average for the first time in three years. Similarly, the total examination points scored by students in their best eight examination results are set to be above the national figure for the first time since 2009.

Although examination results have improved, the progress students make varies between subjects. The percentage of students making the expected progress in English and mathematics has risen but remains very close to the national average, the minimum level expected by the government (the floor target). In both subjects, girls made much better progress than boys.

Those students at risk of not doing well and those that need extra help made good progress because of well-organised guidance and support. However, the small number of students training at places away from the school underachieved. Students from a wide variety of different ethnic background secured better examination results and made more progress than those of White British origin.

The quality of teaching still varies. In an outstanding English lesson in Year 7, the students were introduced to the world of Charles Dickens by very good use of Victorian images, dictionaries, and excellent questioning that focused remorselessly on improving the descriptive language the students used. They thoroughly enjoyed the work, listened respectfully to their classmates and were keen to read their own written work aloud; students made rapid progress. In a good business studies lesson in Year 12, the students made good progress working in small groups and the teacher focused effectively on developing the students' accurate use of business language. However, even better progress could have been made if the teacher had guided whole-class discussion to reveal the next teaching point instead of providing the next set of facts. Those lessons that required improvement did not always set work at the right level to challenge the students' thinking and time was not used effectively. Action has been taken to improve teaching and there is some evidence that sixth form standards have improved, however, teaching requires further improvement. Accurate assessment information is now available to staff; however, it is not used consistently.

The students' behaviour was a positive feature in every lesson. Even when tasks offered limited challenge, students continued to work hard. The students' enthusiasm for the lesson was clear when tasks were active and challenging.

Attendance continues to rise and is just above average. Punctuality to school and to lessons is good.

The monitoring of teaching has been strengthened and the school is being supported by a national leader of education from another Catholic school and a local leader of education from an outstanding Essex school. HMI invited staff from the senior management team to join the observation of teaching. The views they expressed matched the judgements given by HMI. A programme of lesson observations has been developed across the school, but the evaluations made are not routinely presented to the governing body and this needs to be initiated quickly.

New systems have been set up to check students' progress, but these are not fully linked to the monitoring of teaching. Information on students' progress and analysis of examination outcomes are not presented to the governing body alongside comparable national data, and this needs to be dealt with quickly. Consequently, it remains difficult for the governors to review information and challenge the school on the progress being made.

The post-inspection statement of action was judged to be fit for purpose, school improvement planning is detailed and progress has been made, but achievement and teaching still require improvement. Self-evaluation is extensive but needs to be reviewed against the September 2012 Ofsted inspection criteria.

I hope that you have found the inspection helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

David Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the attainment and progress of sixth form students by:
 - ensuring students are appropriately qualified for the courses they take
 - undertaking regular and frequent monitoring of students' progress and of the quality of the teaching they receive
 - and taking quick and effective action where necessary to help bring about improvements.

- Improve students' learning by developing the quality of teaching further so that as a matter of course teachers ensure that:
 - they assess students' understanding both during lessons and through the frequent marking of their work and modify teaching approaches where learning is insufficient
 - students' different abilities are catered for in lessons so that all are challenged
 - students are given the opportunity to experience at first hand what they are learning about, whenever practicable and appropriate
 - there is improvement in students' presentation of their work.

- Increase accountability by providing measurable success criteria for actions being taken by leaders, with interim targets so that the progress made can be readily evaluated.