

CfBT Inspection Services
Suite 22
West Lancs Investment Centre
Maple View
Skelmersdale
WN8 9TG

T 0300 1231231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 01695 566862
Direct F 01695 729320
Direct email:
rcowley@cfbt.com



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Mr Ian Walker
Headteacher
Sacred Heart Catholic College
Liverpool Road
Crosby
Liverpool
Merseyside
L23 5TF

Dear Mr Walker

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Sacred Heart Catholic College, Sefton

Following my visit to your college on 3 July 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings of my visit. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the college since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the college was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in April 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with: the headteacher and his senior leadership team; a group of seven middle leaders; sixteen students; three members of the Governing Body; a representative of the Archdiocese of Liverpool; and a representative of the local authority. Discussions focused on the actions taken since the inspection in April 2013. I was grateful, as part of these discussions, to view a sample of observations of teaching and learning undertaken by leaders and to see the records of the two reviews of marking undertaken by the local authority in conjunction with one of the senior leaders. I was also grateful to receive the college improvement plan prior to this visit.

Context

There have been no significant changes in staffing since the inspection of April 2013.

Main findings

Under the strong leadership of the headteacher and his senior leaders the college has grasped the nettle firmly. The determination of the whole college community to be at least good by its next routine school inspection is tangible. Senior leaders and governors have acted swiftly to put into place plans to improve the quality of teaching and learning and to strengthen leadership capacity across the college. Actions have been immediate and successes are evident already.

The college is expecting its best ever results in mathematics in 2013. Eighty eight per cent of Year 11 students are expected to attain at least a grade C in this subject. Following the dip in 2012 in the number of Year 11 students making at least expected progress in English, this figure is expected to rise to 80% this year. Improvements are also evident in the quality of marking. Following a sharp review undertaken by the local authority in conjunction with a senior leader, it is clear more work is marked routinely by teachers than at the time of the inspection of April 2013. From this review leaders and governors can see that in mathematics there were very precise indications of where students should go next in their learning. There were also examples of marking in history and science that identified well the next steps students should take. Students value these improvements too. Those spoken with were fulsome in their praise of the clearer targets they are now being set. They were also very pleased to report a difference in the way they have been taught over the last few months. For example, they appreciate the opportunities to work collaboratively with each other and being able to work things out for themselves. They report this makes their learning more interesting than in the past. They also report it keeps them 'on the ball' and makes them 'use their brains more'.

Wider leadership across the college is developing well. Middle leaders rightly praise the headteacher and senior leaders for making clear the challenges ahead and explaining how staff will be supported to meet these challenges. Middle leaders, for example, report they are empowered to support and challenge one another in order to ensure the focus of teachers is set more keenly on the progress students make in their lessons. They value greatly the opportunities to meet regularly together in 'Good Practice Forums' and 'Friday Forums'. The Good Practice Forum presents good opportunities for colleagues from different departments to share successes, identifying features of outstanding teaching and ways in which marking quality is improving for example. The Friday Forums present equally good opportunities for heads of department to report on and be held accountable for the success of actions they and their teams have been responsible.

A key feature of the college's work is the development of coaches: teachers in the college who work with colleagues to improve teaching quality and learning for students. The college has powerful examples of teachers who have improved both teaching and learning quality in just a few short weeks as a result of this work.

The governing body is holding leaders to account increasingly well. The monitoring committee meets regularly and governors spoken with displayed a keen understanding of the improvements made and what needs to be done to improve further. The college's improvement plan rightly has high aspirations. It could be improved by making clear the intended successes of actions taken.

At this moment in time, the college is well placed to continue its journey and successes.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The college should take further action to:

- review its improvement plan to make clear the intended successes of actions taken

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

Additional input from HMI

At a date to be arranged, HMI will:

- in the Autumn term of 2013 carry out joint observations of lessons with middle leaders and coaches and with them review the progress being made to improve the quality of teaching and learning
- in the early Spring term of 2014 work with senior leaders to ascertain progress made to date and that evidence presented supports evaluations made.

External support

The college is drawing on a range of support well. All partners have been quick to react in order to provide the right levels of support and challenge to leaders. The local authority, for example, has worked with senior leaders to scrutinise students' work to ascertain the quality of marking. College leaders are also making effective use of a local network of schools to support them in their drive to raise the quality of teaching and learning. Furthermore, the Archdiocese is providing clear guidance to governors so that they maintain their clear focus.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Sefton, and to the Archdiocese of Liverpool.

Yours sincerely

Mark Williams

Her Majesty's Inspector