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10 March 2014

Michael Manley
Headteacher
St Paul's Catholic School
Phoenix Drive
Leadenhall
Milton Keynes
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Dear Mr Manley

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Paul's Catholic School

Following my visit to your school on 10 March 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the findings. 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 school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

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

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you, other senior leaders, the Chair of the Governing Body, and a representative of the local authority, to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I also held a telephone discussion with a school improvement partner appointed by the local authority. I evaluated the school improvement plan and read a range of documentation, including reviews of the Governing Body and of the sixth form. Together, we visited a range of lessons briefly to observe teaching, talk to students and look at books.

Main findings

The Governing Body has acted quickly in response to the inspection by commissioning a full review of its effectiveness. The resulting document is thorough

and hard-hitting. It finds that governors have been too reliant on your view and evaluation of the school's performance and that this was over-generous. It reports that governors have not had the skills, experience or knowledge necessary to challenge as they should have done.

The Chair of the Governing Body accepts wholeheartedly the findings of the review. Actions to address it include a skills audit, governor training in how to interpret and challenge student performance information; and a review of the roles and functions of the governing body. Meetings are now more professionally run and clerked. Governors understand better the need to have an independent analysis of the school's performance so that they can hold you more firmly to account for its improvement. The role of governors in improving their own work, as well as in monitoring the improvement of the school, is clearly stipulated in the school action plan.

The action plan is a clear and comprehensive response to the findings of the inspection. It has realistic timelines for improvement, with an appropriate 'front-loading' of activities designed to secure rapid change in key areas. It specifies what success will look like, but not always in terms of what students will know, experience or be able to do. This aspect could be clearer to enable everyone delivering the plan to be clear about what success should look like in the classroom.

The local authority has appointed a school improvement partner whose initial report is helpfully uncompromising and clear. It complements and expands on the inspection report by pointing out where there are weaknesses and inconsistencies in the school's work. Similarly, her joint report on the effectiveness of the sixth form provides a thorough baseline for improvement.

Since the inspection, you and your senior leadership team have reconsidered and re-evaluated your approach to raising achievement. You accept that it has not been strong enough to secure good progress for all students. You have not checked on student progress closely enough to spot slippage and adapt teaching; some groups of students have under-achieved, such as girls in mathematics or students who speak English as an additional language. You are determined to put this right. Teachers now base their planning on what they know about students' starting points. Senior and middle leaders visit lessons more frequently to check on the quality of teaching and, crucially, take account of a wider range of evidence than just a short classroom visit, to determine whether teaching is typically good or not. These are encouraging steps. However, visits to classrooms during this visit showed that there are still inconsistencies in how teachers mark work and in the quality and quantity of work in students' books.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection. My next visit will focus on how effectively senior leaders have turned the analyses and self-evaluation activities since the inspection into sustainable improvements in teaching and achievement.

External support

The local authority regarded the school as 'light touch' prior to the inspection. It had not anticipated or spotted the decline in standards that led to the inspection judgement. However, it has reacted decisively to support the school to improve quickly. It has a closer and more challenging partnership with the school now. Newly attached local authority officers have been instrumental in helping the school have a sharper and clearer view of its own strengths and weaknesses.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Milton Keynes and as below.

Yours sincerely

Christine Raeside
Her Majesty's Inspector