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5 June 2014

Clive Matthew
Executive Headteacher
Nicholas Breakspear Catholic School
Colney Heath Lane
St Albans
AL4 0TT

Dear Mr Matthew

Special measures monitoring inspection of Nicholas Breakspear Catholic School

Following my visit with Cheryl Jackson, Additional Inspector, to your school on 3–4 June 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in October 2013. The full list of the areas for improvement identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

- The school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.
- The Trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.
- I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying them to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Hertfordshire, the Diocese of Westminster, the Education Funding Agency, and the Academies Advisers Unit.

Yours sincerely

John Daniell
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in October 2013

- Improve the quality of teaching throughout the school so that all is good or better by ensuring that teachers:
 - make better use of the information about pupils, including assessment data, to prepare a range of activities that address their individual needs, interests and capabilities
 - give pupils plenty of opportunities to practise their reading and writing skills in interesting contexts in a range of subjects
 - make sure that pupils' work is always marked in a way that gives them clear guidance about how it can be improved.

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by making sure that:
 - the checking of the quality of teaching and learning gives teachers clear guidance on what they need to do to improve and identifies and shares good practice
 - the new initiatives for using, analysing and acting on data about pupils' progress are consistently applied across the school
 - plans for spending additional resources, such as pupil premium funding, are reviewed to ensure that they are well thought out and consistently implemented so that gaps in achievement reduce.

- Improve attendance by:
 - analysing data in more detail to identify those groups and individuals who do not attend school regularly enough
 - working more closely with the families of pupils who are poor attenders.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 3–4 June 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher and other senior leaders, the associate headteacher designate, subject leaders, groups of students, members of the governing body, an external consultant from the local authority, and a representative from the Diocese of Westminster Trust Board.

Context

Since the previous inspection, you have appointed an associate headteacher who takes up post officially from September 2014, but who is currently seconded onto the senior leadership team. An assistant headteacher left the school in April 2014. You have restructured the senior leadership team as an interim arrangement until the end of August 2014, and have agreed plans for a new structure from September 2014, when you will have three deputy headteachers and three assistant headteachers.

Achievement of students at the school

Following disappointing GCSE examination results in 2013 in English, science, modern foreign languages, physical education and design and technology, you have worked well with a number of less effective teachers in order to improve students' outcomes. Information gained from GCSE examinations already taken early by students in Year 11, as well as additional information gathered from the results of a series of practice examinations, indicates a rise in attainment. If achieved, you forecast the proportion of students gaining five or more A* to C grades at GCSE including in English and mathematics will be broadly in line with the national average achieved in 2013. However, as students enter the school with levels of attainment which are already broadly average this does not yet represent good enough achievement.

Your plans to address teachers' low expectations of students and students' low expectations of themselves are at an early stage of development. Historically, targets sets for students' progress have not been challenging enough, and you are in the process of making these more demanding. Consequently, there is some confusion among teachers about how much progress students are expected to make. Because of this lack of clarity, targets are not yet challenging enough for all students currently in the school, and teachers' planning does not always secure rapid progress for everyone because these expectations differ from subject to subject. You have visited other schools which have successfully tackled underachievement, and have established plans to identify students at risk of underperforming more quickly through a smarter tracking system and by holding regular student progress meetings

for all year groups which include key members of staff. Consequently, you can direct carefully targeted support more swiftly, and identify the barriers which are preventing students from making the progress expected.

Disabled students and those who have special educational needs make less progress than others in the school, but the gap between them and others in the school is closing steadily, particularly in Year 10. The gap in attainment between students supported by the pupil premium and others in the school is closing steadily in Year 11, and more rapidly in Year 10.

The support provided during form time to tackle weaker literacy and reading skills has become more effective, and you cite many examples of students whose reading ages have now increased to where they should be. Information provided on books borrowed from the library indicates an increase in the number of students who borrow books in Key Stage 3 since the introduction of the literacy improvement programme, but in Key Stage 4 the number of books borrowed has fallen compared to the same time last year. You have very recently started to use student volunteers from all year groups to work with their peers after school to help them secure improved outcomes across a range of subject areas.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching over time is variable across and within subject areas. In some cases, students learn highly effectively where teaching provides a high level of challenge, but in a small number of cases learning is still inadequate. In many lessons, inventive and interesting materials engage students so that they extend their knowledge and understanding of the topics being taught. However, in too many cases, an over-reliance on commercially produced worksheets means that students are not encouraged to deepen and extend their understanding. Hence, progress is slower. In their planning for learning, most teachers clearly know about the abilities and needs of different groups of students in their classes, and are expected to identify strategies to stretch and challenge all students, but not all teachers are using this information well enough in order to accelerate every student's progress at an appropriate rate.

Teachers are well supported in developing their practice. Your weekly teaching and learning sessions are well attended, and provide teachers with opportunities to showcase examples of good teaching practice and to support weaker teachers by sharing materials and offering guidance and support.

The quality of teachers' marking is improving but is inconsistent. The most effective marking corrects any misconceptions by asking students to carry out further research or to answer a carefully structured follow-up question, which allows them to demonstrate that they understand what they have got wrong. Weaker marking might tell students what they need to do to improve, but does not require them to

respond. Some students do not respond even when teachers' marking requires it, and some teachers do not routinely check that they do so.

Behaviour and safety of students

Students are courteous and interacted very well with inspectors. They are positive about the initiatives which have been introduced to encourage them to behave well, wear their uniform with pride and attend school regularly. The use of score cards which are carried around, and to which points are added or deducted, is making a difference to students' attitudes towards their school. Attitudes towards learning are typically positive when teaching engages students' interest.

The number of behavioural incidents recorded has declined. However, school leaders are aware that a greater proportion of incidents occur in Year 9 than in other year groups.

Students' attendance has increased slightly since the last inspection and is approaching the national average. Students who are supported by the pupil premium attend less well than their peers. In order to tackle this, eligible students have been placed in groups and they are mentored on a weekly basis. Their attendance has improved slightly since the previous inspection. Parent support meetings focusing on attendance have also taken place, and home visits have been carried out to support parents in getting their children to come to school. Attendance plans are set up for those students who are persistently absent from school.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Your school improvement plan has been implemented well, and you are using clear systems to monitor the progress you are making. Some comments recorded on the plan when initiatives have been achieved tend to state what actions have been taken, rather than evaluate the impact of these actions. Other initiatives have been introduced fairly recently, and it is not yet possible to evaluate the impact of these.

Your proposed leadership structure for September 2014 aims to strengthen capacity at both senior and subject leadership level, by matching roles to strengths. Historically, the pastoral teams have had a higher profile in the school than subject teams and some staff have expressed concerns about this when responding to your internal surveys. You have rightly addressed this perceived lack of collaborative teamwork by setting up systems which bring staff from both teams together to work as one cohesive team. This has already raised the profile of subject leaders, who welcome this move. Subject leaders told me they are starting to feel much more empowered in their role, and clearly recognise the crucial role they have in contributing to raising standards across the school. You rightly recognise that closer collaboration between pastoral leaders and subject leaders is required in order to drive school improvement at a more rapid pace. Your approved plans to support

students who you identify as underachieving by staging weekly meetings across all year groups, and which involve pastoral leaders and subject leaders, encourage a much needed cohesive approach towards supporting these students.

A comprehensive training programme is now in place to ensure greater consistency in leadership at subject leader level, but these leaders have not yet been trained to observe teaching in their areas and evaluate the impact this is having on students' achievement.

The school's management of teaching is strengthening. You are building up more detailed profiles of individual teachers through a range of monitoring activities, but these are not yet complete. Inspectors agreed with the views of senior leaders when teaching was jointly observed and its impact on students' outcomes was discussed. Senior leaders who were then observed providing brief feedback to teachers rightly focused on the impact of teaching on students' learning and progress over time.

The members of the governing body are aware of the school's strengths and weaknesses and recognise the challenges that remain to be tackled. They receive regular reports on the impact of initiatives funded through the pupil premium. Not all initiatives have met with success; for example, the breakfast club targeted at eligible students has been abandoned due to poor attendance. However, governors could point to other initiatives which are clearly having some impact, including improved attendance strategies and one-to-one support sessions which are improving outcomes.

External support

The Trust checks on the school's progress on a regular basis through its regular monitoring forums which are attended by senior leaders, the Chair of the Governing Body and an external consultant from the local authority's support services. Following the judgment at the first monitoring inspection the Trust has now taken appropriate steps to ensure that the statement of action is fit for purpose. The executive headteacher has drawn on the expertise from his own school in order to add capacity to leadership and strengthen the quality of teaching, and mentoring arrangements are ensuring that senior leaders continue to develop their leadership skills.