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13 June 2014

Mrs Caroline Vile
Headteacher
Ellesmere Port Catholic High School
Capenhurst Lane
Ellesmere Port
Cheshire
CH65 7AQ

Dear Mrs Vile

Special measures monitoring inspection of Ellesmere Port Catholic High School

Following my visit with Kathleen Harris and Nell Banfield, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 11 and 12 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 November 2013. 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.

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 school may appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published 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 and the Director of Children's Services for Cheshire West and Chester and as below.

Yours sincerely

Joan Bonenfant

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve teaching to be consistently good or better in order to accelerate students' progress in all subjects, especially mathematics, and particularly at Key Stage 3, in the sixth form and for disabled students and those with special educational needs by:
 - eradicating inadequate teaching
 - raising teachers' expectations of what students can achieve
 - using assessment information to plan learning activities that provide suitable challenge through matching tasks more carefully to students' learning needs
 - checking students' understanding throughout lessons and adjusting activities or strategies when the rate of progress slows
 - presenting more interesting topics and a wider range of learning activities in order to improve the enjoyment and enthusiasm students have for learning
 - improving the quality of questioning to ensure students think more deeply about their work and have to explain and justify their ideas
 - applying whole-school approaches consistently to the marking of students' work, providing clear guidance for improvement and making certain that all students follow this advice
 - improving the effectiveness of teaching assistants through involving them in the assessment of students' work and the planning of lessons, and through teachers having a more flexible approach to how teaching assistants are deployed to support students' learning.

- Improve attendance and students' and some teachers' punctuality in arriving to lessons by:
 - analysing attendance data rigorously to ascertain which groups of pupils are not attending well and taking prompt and effective action to improve their attendance
 - monitoring students' punctuality in arriving on time to every lesson and taking prompt and effective action to address any lateness
 - reminding teachers of the need to show a good example to students by their arrival to lessons on time.

- Improve leadership and management and governance by:
 - ensuring teachers, leaders and managers at all levels rigorously evaluate the impact of their work on students' achievement, attendance and behaviour, and that they use these evaluations to guide further improvements
 - increasing the rigour with which governors, leaders and managers hold teachers and other staff to account for making improvements rapidly, particularly with regard to students' safety and achievement
 - increasing the involvement of parents and students as partners in school improvement.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 11 – 12 June 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, senior leaders, groups of students, other members of staff and representatives of the local authority and the archdiocese. Inspectors observed students in social spaces, such as in the dining hall, and spoke to students informally at break and lunchtime. Inspectors also attended an assembly. Inspectors scrutinised samples of students' work and examined a range of documentation, including records of attendance and behaviour, governing body meetings and information on students' progress.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection, the former headteacher has left and a new headteacher is in post. The head of the science department has left the school and the head of sixth form has stepped down from his position. New appointments have been made to these roles. A number of teachers are on a support programme to improve the quality of their teaching. A new post has been created to focus on improving the progress of students eligible for support through the pupil premium (the pupil premium is additional government funding to support students eligible for free school meals and those in the care of the local authority). A data analyst has also been appointed. A new head of modern foreign languages is to take up the position in September 2014, along with two new teachers in science and two in mathematics.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Much more challenging targets have been set for students' progress. As a result, this school crackles with ambition, expectations are higher and the drive for improvement is tangible. Staff in the school have responded extremely positively to a raft of initiatives that have already had an impact on students' achievement; as one member of staff commented during our visit, 'There is now no lid and no limit' to the school's aspirations. According to information provided during the inspection, the school is on target to record its best ever examination results, representing a considerable improvement on previous years' performances.

A combination of intensive support, revision programmes and more focused teaching is reaping substantial benefits, particularly in Key Stage 4, and most especially in English and mathematics. The school has justifiably focused its attention on immediately improving the achievement of students facing imminent public examinations, as the results are so important for their future prospects.

In Key Stage 3, there are signs of improvement in achievement in English and mathematics, but little demonstrable evidence was seen to suggest this is the case in other subjects. Strategies to improve target-setting and teaching across the curriculum in Key Stage 3 are at the early stages of development and therefore have not had time to have a positive impact on students' achievement.

Achievement is improving in Key Stage 5, particularly in science. Intensive support for students has been provided and the school's predictions for outcomes in the forthcoming examinations demonstrate that this is having a positive impact. Students in the sixth form acknowledge that teachers' expectations are higher; students spoken to by inspectors admitted they have had to 'work much harder'.

The progress of disabled students and those with special educational needs remains too variable, because teachers' expectations of what these students can achieve are not always high enough. Gaps between the progress of students eligible for support through the pupil premium and that of other students have narrowed since the previous inspection in English and, though less so, in mathematics.

The quality of teaching

The new headteacher has adopted a multi-pronged approach to improving teaching. Intensive training, sometimes led by the headteacher herself, has been provided for all teachers to raise expectations and improve skills.

The expertise at present in the school has been harnessed well to share good practice. The principles of outstanding and good teaching have informed training for teachers to show just what students in the school can achieve when taught skilfully and with enthusiasm. As a result, the overall quality of teaching is improving, although the school itself acknowledges that this is work in progress.

Inadequate teaching has been tackled and bespoke packages of support have been offered to weaker teachers. This has been much appreciated; as one member of staff candidly shared with inspectors, when his teaching was criticised in the past, he did not know what he needed to do to improve – he now feels supported and guided to become a better teacher.

The marking of work has improved since the previous inspection, but it is still not consistently good enough across all subjects. Examples of exemplary marking were seen during the inspection: for example, when inspectors examined students' books during a French lesson, it was clear that the teacher's advice on how to improve the work had been swiftly acted on by students. Over time, this has led to students making evident gains in their learning and, as a result, these students have made outstanding progress. This good practice is not universally followed. Some marking is cursory and students do not always respond to teachers' comments. As a result,

too much marking has little or no impact on improving the rate at which students make progress.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The behaviour of students has improved immeasurably since my last visit. Students observed during this monitoring inspection were dressed smartly and behaved impeccably, with minimal supervision, engaging well with each other and following teachers' instructions with good humour and little fuss.

Students feel safe in school and speak enthusiastically about the changes since the arrival of the new headteacher. For example, as one student commented: 'The displays around the corridors are inspirational and we feel the school is a happy vibrant place', and another added: 'I like getting out of bed in the morning now!'

Students appreciate the way they have been consulted about proposed changes. They feel that their voices are now listened to: for example, all students have had a say in the school's plans for redecoration, alterations to the sixth form and the revamped format for sports day.

Attendance has improved overall, although the proportion of students who are persistently absent is still unacceptably high. During this monitoring inspection, students and teachers arrived punctually to lessons. The number of incidents of poor behaviour has dropped, but the school does not analyse sufficiently rigorously which students are repeatedly misbehaving and in which lessons.

Students have a clearer understanding of what is acceptable. They admit that sometimes they used to get away with poor behaviour in the past, but acknowledge that teachers are now much more consistent in insisting that students behave well in lessons. Students enjoy the newly introduced rewards system for attendance, punctuality and behaviour – they relish competing with other form groups for prizes and do not like letting their classmates down.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The new headteacher has been successful in quickly getting everyone united behind her to attack the long legacy of underperformance that has blighted this school. Staff, students and parents alike appreciate her commitment, dedication and aspiration; her exceptional leadership qualities have inspired all members of the school community to step up to the mark and turn the school around.

The governing body has responded enthusiastically to direction from the headteacher. Since my previous visit, governors have had further training and observed the work of governors in a local outstanding school. They have also had training on how to manage the performance of staff. Governors are much more

involved in the life of the school; for example they attend breakfast meetings with senior staff and subject leaders about performance and are therefore more knowledgeable about where the strengths and weaknesses are. As a result, governors are gaining the skills they need to hold the school to account more effectively.

Other leaders and managers across the school are 'on message' and determined to move the school forward. They are now more skilled in evaluating the impact of their work on students' achievement because regular meetings with senior leaders hold them to account for students' progress in their area of responsibility.

The leadership and management of the quality of teaching require further refinement. When observing lessons, school leaders place too much emphasis on watching what the teacher is doing and do not take into account sufficiently the progress that students are making. As a result, the school has an inaccurate view of the overall quality of teaching.

Proposals to expand the range of courses available in the sixth form from next year provide more opportunities for students to study for qualifications that are better suited to their needs, abilities and interests. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development has been enhanced further by the newly installed display boards which exhort all students to make the best of the opportunities that life presents to them.

External support

The local authority has commissioned support for the school from Wirral, a nearby authority. There has been a small-scale review of performance and another more extensive review is scheduled to take place in the near future. The new headteacher's close contacts with two National Leaders in Education and two training schools, St. John Bosco Arts College and Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic College, continue to be immensely beneficial, particularly in driving improvements in the quality of teaching.