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Mrs Catherine McHale
Head of Academy
Saint Mary's Catholic Voluntary Academy
Wellington Street
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Dear Mrs McHale

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of Saint Mary's Catholic Voluntary Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 11 July 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and 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 academy's recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to have serious weaknesses in April 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the executive headteacher, head of academy, senior leaders, the Chair of the Governing Body and a representative of the sponsor. A telephone conversation was held with another representative of the sponsor. The sponsor's statement of action, the academy's action plan and other evidence provided by the academy were evaluated. The executive headteacher took Her Majesty's Inspector on a tour of the academy.

Context

There will be significant changes to staffing in September 2014, including the appointment of a new assistant headteacher.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The executive headteacher and head of academy have high expectations of staff and pupils and a clear vision of how the academy will improve. There is a detailed action plan which addresses all the areas for improvement, is supported by professional development for staff and is linked to a calendar of monitoring and evaluation. The plan has success criteria for the end of the next academic year, but lacks milestones which show how progress towards the success criteria will be monitored.

The systems for tracking and evaluating pupils' progress are robust. Assessment data have been rigorously moderated and staff have a very good understanding of the progress of each pupil in their class. Data are collected and analysed half termly by class teachers and termly progress meetings with academy leaders hold teachers to account. This rigour has raised the expectations of teachers and, together with a new planning format, has improved teaching and learning. Pupils in Key Stage 2 have been grouped for literacy and numeracy according to the stage they have reached in their learning rather than their age. As a result planned activities are matched better to pupils' abilities and all pupils are more appropriately challenged, including the most able. Scrutiny of pupils' work by leaders, and books seen during the tour of the academy, show the new marking and feedback policy is helping pupils to improve, particularly in literacy. However, the response of pupils to teachers' helpful feedback is not consistent.

Leaders and managers have a very good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of teaching and learning as a result of effective checking through lesson observations and the scrutiny of teachers' planning and pupils' books. This information is compared with the progress made by every pupil in each class to provide a clear picture. Teachers whose practice is not good are provided with personalised support programmes and action plans by the assistant headteacher, as well as opportunities to observe good practice. This is having some impact, resulting in better planning and marking and feedback to pupils. A range of training has supported the development of the skills of teachers and teaching assistants. A variety of new schemes has been purchased to help improve the teaching of literacy and numeracy and to ensure the academy is ready to teach the new curriculum.

Pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning have improved, both as a result of the regrouping of pupils in Key Stage 2, and the new behaviour and rewards policy. No poor behaviour was seen during the tour of the academy. Pupils were seen to be engaged in their literacy learning in all classrooms. Actions taken by the academy leaders to check and reward attendance have resulted in better attendance. A recently appointed educational welfare officer already has an action plan to further improve attendance. Leaders and governors are taking their responsibility for parental communication seriously, holding a range of parents' meetings, including one in Polish.

As a result of these improvements, attainment and progress are improving across the academy, although there is still a cause for concern in Year 4. A higher proportion of pupils in Year 6 is attaining Level 4 in reading, writing and mathematics than in 2013 and progress has also improved, particularly in reading and writing. However, attainment and progress are still below national averages in Year 6. Key Stage 1 attainment has also improved in reading, writing and mathematics since 2013, although it is below national averages. The proportion of pupils meeting the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics screening check rose in 2014 and is now in line with the current national average. The proportion of children attaining a good level of development in the Early Years Foundation Stage also rose in 2014. There are still gaps in the performance of pupils who are in receipt of support through the pupil premium and their peers. The academy provides a range of support to boost the learning of those who are identified as underachieving. The success of this can be seen in Year 6 where the gaps between pupils supported by the pupil premium and others are small. In Year 6, these pupils made rapid progress in the summer term 2014.

Strong action has been taken to develop middle leadership. The leadership in the academy has been reorganised and middle leaders, both current and new to the academy for September 2014, have been provided with numerous opportunities for professional development, including attending courses and opportunities to work with colleagues from other academies. Middle leaders have a good understanding of how to check pupils' progress and teaching and learning in their areas. A range of well-planned new policies have started to have an effect and have already been shared with the new staff for September 2014 at a training day. The senior leaders have ensured the academy is very well prepared for September.

Governors are at an early stage in developing robust procedures to check the effectiveness of the use of pupil premium funding. They now receive better data to inform their understanding and have been trained by the executive headteacher in understanding and analysing data. They have a calendar of planned monitoring for the next academic year. The external review of governance has begun and will continue in September along with a review of the effectiveness of pupil premium spending.

The sponsor provides effective challenge and support through regular monitoring meetings with governors and academy leaders, and half-termly visits from a representative. Further checks will be made by an academy improvement partner recently appointed by the diocese. The academy has very useful links with other schools and academies in the academy trust and in the diocese. Three teachers have been seconded on a part-time basis from academies in the trust to help develop teaching and learning, assessment, planning and the Early Years Foundation Stage. This support has improved learning. The local Catholic secondary academy has provided curriculum support and opportunities to use their specialist learning areas.

Following the monitoring inspection the following judgements were made:

The academy's action plan is fit for purpose.

The sponsor's statement of action is fit for purpose.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Diocese and the Department for Education Academies Advisers Unit. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Helen Lane
Her Majesty's Inspector