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Mr Anthony Boyle
Headteacher
St Mary's Catholic College
Wallasey Village
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Merseyside
CH45 3LN

Dear Mr Boyle

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Mary's Catholic College, Wirral

Following my visit to your school on 11 December 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection 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 September 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its previous section 5 inspection the school was also judged to require improvement.

Senior leaders and governors are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection and plans are not sharply focused on rapidly bringing about improvement. The school should take immediate action to:

- improve the school development plan and its impact by ensuring that:
 - priorities match those identified in the previous inspection report
 - that the milestones are dated and include clear detailed expectations of what will have been achieved
 - the persons responsible for leading an action are not also monitoring the success of the action

- ensure that middle leaders have a clear understanding of what constitutes good teaching and learning and their accountability for the progress that students make in their area of responsibility

- strengthen the student voice so all are aware of the roles and responsibilities of their student council representatives and how to engage with them, and provide feedback on actions taken as a result of the student voice.

I recommend an external review of the school's use of the pupil premium fund.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, other senior leaders, students, the chair and vice chair of the governing body, and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The school improvement plan and self-evaluation documentation were evaluated.

Main findings

The overall progress made by students in the school, given their starting points, is below expectations and declining across all subject areas. This is particularly the case for disadvantaged students who achieve less well than their peers, and current data indicates that the achievement gap is not closing, and in English and mathematics has widened slightly. Although attendance rates are gradually improving they are still below the national average and the average for similar schools.

The school is aware that their previous judgements regarding the quality of teaching and the levels of progress made by students were over-generous. Plans are in place for middle leadership training and training to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The students I spoke with were all of the view that marking had improved since the last inspection and they appreciated the opportunity they had to respond to teachers' feedback. However, they were unable to cite any other changes to teaching and learning and some were of the view that work was still not challenging enough.

Improvement planning is not fit for purpose. The plan does not clearly address the areas for improvement identified in the last inspection report or indicate through specified milestones whether success criteria have been met since strategies were put in place, or what still needs to be done. Although it is clear who is responsible for leading on particular actions, it is unclear who is evaluating the success of actions. I strongly suggest that action plans be reviewed in the light of the recommendations at the top of this letter.

Students described their teachers as helpful and encouraging, particularly in the sixth form where they felt very well informed and supported in their future educational and career aspirations. However, only students in Year 11 could recall

having received careers education and guidance to date. Many of the students spoken with enjoyed the good range of subject options and thought that the school was a friendly and safe environment. However, they were critical of the communications systems which meant that important messages were not always passed on to them by their form tutors. They said that behaviour policies were now carried out more consistently and poor behaviour was more likely to be 'nipped in the bud' by disruptive students being removed from lessons.

Although all of the students could recall that last year they completed a questionnaire on teaching and learning they were unaware of how their views may have influenced policy or practice. All had heard of the student council but few knew who their council representative was and none could cite any changes the council had made on their behalf.

Overall, school leaders have not tackled the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection with sufficient rigour and the actions taken have not had the impact that is required to move the school forward with the necessary urgency.

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

External support

A range of initiatives have been put in place since the last inspection. Members of the English department are working with teachers in local schools to help standardise assessments, and there are plans for mathematics and English teachers to observe good practice in local schools. A national leader of education has begun working with senior leaders to address improvements in tracking systems and processes, and the local authority has brokered consultant support for the science department and are part-funding middle leadership training. The headteacher is taking part in Ofsted's 'Through the Lens' training and activities and a diocesan national lead for religious education is supporting the school to raise standards in religious education. However, it is too early to judge the impact of these initiatives as most are recent or about to begin.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Wirral, the Diocese and the Education Funding Agency.

Yours sincerely

Janet Palmer

Her Majesty's Inspector