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Declan Linnane
Headteacher
Nicholas Breakspear Catholic School
Colney Heath Lane
St Albans
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Dear Mr Linnane

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Nicholas Breakspear Catholic School

Following my visit to your school on 10 February 2015, 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 section 5 inspection in November 2014.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement. 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. The school should take further action to:

- share a summary of the school's action plan with parents and carers, identifying clearly how they can support the school's improvements
- promote leaders' high expectations and students' achievements more explicitly, for example through the school's website
- ensure that feedback provided for teachers and teaching assistants, and their own evaluation, is recorded comprehensively in order to help them refine their work further
- develop the academic monitoring role of heads of year to support early identification of any underachievement between different subjects taken by the same student
- make full use of Ofsted's resources to support the school's improvement, including examples of good practice.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, the executive headteacher, three deputy headteachers, two assistant headteachers, the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO), the subject leaders for English, science and expressive arts, three governors including the Chair of the Governing Body, a representative of the diocese of Westminster Academies Trust and a representative of the local authority. In addition, I evaluated the school's action plan, analysed monitoring records and reviewed information provided for parents and carers. I visited classes with you to see students and staff at work.

Context

Since the Section 5 inspection there have been no changes in staffing. The school continues to work closely with John Henry Newman Catholic School in Stevenage, which shares sixth form provision and an Executive Headteacher with Nicholas Breakspear school. The associate headteacher started in September 2014, prior to the removal of special measures.

Main findings

Since the previous inspection, you have:

- written an action plan to address the areas requiring improvement
- focused professional development on ensuring that good quality of teaching is consistent across the school
- followed-up professional development with a range of focused monitoring activities to evaluate its impact
- completed an audit of special educational needs provision
- increased the scope of your tracking of students' progress
- provided additional support for students whose attendance or achievement gives cause for concern.

You, your senior team and the governors have high aspirations for the students. Your vision for the school is supported by staff who are clear about their roles and consistent in their efforts to 'get the school to good' as quickly as possible. Regular evaluation of your action plan is helping to keep improvements on track. Although the plan is unusually large, the priorities address the areas requiring improvement fully and make the accountability of staff clear. Expectations of middle leaders are increasing. As a consequence, middle leaders are taking a more central role in monitoring the quality of teaching and learning in the subjects they lead. This includes scrutiny of teachers' effectiveness when working in particular key stages. Nevertheless, the school has not given enough consideration to how parents can support the improvements the plan seeks to achieve.

You are focusing professional development for staff clearly on the aspects of teaching that require improvement: planning; questioning and marking. Leaders are providing good examples of how to develop these skills through the work of 'advocate' teachers with a strong track record in these areas, through examples displayed in the staff study and through training. More recently, teams of three teachers have started to observe and feedback to each other. The impact of this work on teaching is increasing because lesson observations, learning walks, scrutiny of students' work and discussions with staff pursue these aspects. For example, to evaluate teachers' success in planning lessons tailored to pupils' needs, twenty lesson observations have concentrated on the learning of more able students and twenty on those with special educational needs. The responsiveness of staff to the support given indicates they are very much ready to move onto the next stage of their professional development through perceptive critical feedback and reflection.

The secure knowledge you are gaining about the strengths and weaknesses in teaching is helping to inform your work to raise students' achievement. Your system of tracking students' progress emphasises to staff and students that every individual and every lesson matters. Although their contribution to academic monitoring is at an early stage, year heads are now sufficiently well equipped with progress data. They are well placed to support the work of subject leaders by analysing students' progress across their different subjects, helping to spot underachievement early. This complements your subject leaders' use of assessment to identify gaps in students' skills or knowledge specific to their subject. The school's progress tracking shows that since the inspection students are continuing to reach the higher targets set for them. Better teaching, additional opportunities to catch-up and the intensive support of mentors supporting small groups, are contributory factors.

High rates of attendance at consultation sessions for parents and carers show that your work to strengthen links between school and home is proving effective. Your regular surveys of parents, carers and students indicate improved satisfaction with the school. More choice of homework is popular with students and is engaging them more effectively in learning out of school. Initiatives such as your summer school show that better attendance has been sustained for the students who participated. Your audit of special educational needs provision has been followed up. Clearer information for teachers about how to support students who find learning difficult, a more suitable curriculum and collaborative lesson planning between teachers and teaching assistants are contributing to improvements. Sharply focused 'raising achievement' meetings are helping to narrow gaps between students at the school and their peers nationally. This includes students supported by pupil premium funding where the gap nevertheless remains wide.

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

The school is making effective use of collaboration with schools in the diocese and the support provided by the local authority. This includes regular challenge through contribution to an 'action group', training for middle leaders and governors, and moderation of school assessments. School leaders share with other schools the good practice that is developing, using feedback to refine their work further. Governors benefit from the support of a National Leader of Governance. Effective use of self-review is helping to increase the efficiency and impact of governors. For example, more effective use of governor visits to school and closer alignment of governors to key priorities are helping to maintain a strong momentum for improvement.

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

Yours sincerely

Ian Middleton
Her Majesty's Inspector