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2 March 2015

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 Darren Stewart and Naomi Taylor, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 25 and 26 February 2015, 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 fourth 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 Strategic Director of Children's Services for Cheshire West and Chester.

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.

- An external review of governance, to include a specific focus on the school's use of the pupil premium, should be undertaken in order to assess how this and other aspects of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 25 and 26 February 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, groups of students, the Chair and other members of the Governing Body, a representative from the local authority, staff and a representative of the diocese.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, there have been further changes to staffing and the leadership structure. In all, since the previous inspection, almost a quarter of staff have left the school. The former deputy headteacher left the school with effect from December 2014, and he has been replaced by an assistant headteacher in charge of achievement and information on students' progress. The head of science left the school last year and an acting head of the department has been running the department since his departure. A head of science has been appointed to take up post in May 2015. There is a new head of progress in Key Stage 4 and a new head of the modern languages department. Teachers have been appointed to the mathematics, modern languages and science departments to replace those who have left. The leadership of special educational needs has been brought under the management of the inclusion and diversity team, which also includes a new leader in charge of the achievement of students whose circumstances may render them vulnerable. There has been a full external review of provision for students with special educational needs. Following this review, the leadership of special educational needs has been brought under the management of the inclusion and diversity team.

Achievement of pupils at the school

In the sixth form, achievement continues to improve. This is a direct result of much improved leadership of Key Stage 5, where initiatives that had been put in place at my last monitoring inspection are now starting to bear fruit. Students in Year 12 are well placed to meet their targets in their forthcoming AS-level examinations and their attendance is much better than it was at this time last year. Students in Year 13 are moving steadily towards meeting their targets; however, they remain in a less favourable position than students in Year 12 because a proportion of them underachieved in some subjects, such as mathematics, when they sat their examinations at the end of last year. Nevertheless, inspection evidence suggests that effective and appropriate intervention has been put in place to help these students make up any ground they may have lost. In sixth form lessons observed during the inspection, all students were making reasonable progress, including in mathematics.

In Key Stage 4, current information on students' progress demonstrates an improvement on this time last year. Achievement across the curriculum continues to improve apace. Science has improved markedly since the previous inspection and achievement in English continues to be significantly above average across the board, with some students making exceptionally good progress. New leadership of geography shows great promise; lessons have been completely redesigned and students have benefited from extra revision classes: school leaders are determined to leave no stone unturned to make up for weaknesses in the teaching of this subject in the past.

However, the predictions for overall achievement at GCSE are still below where they should be. This is because underachievement remains widespread in mathematics across both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, and this is holding the school back. Some improvement is discernible in mathematics in comparison with this time last year and my third monitoring inspection. Whole-school procedures to monitor the quality of teaching have had some impact in improving the provision in mathematics. However, residual misconceptions that have become established as a result of years of poor teaching are still a major impediment to students making good progress. For example, in one Year 10 mathematics lesson, some very capable students struggled with simple algebraic substitution because they were unclear as to what was meant by certain key terms that should have been taught more effectively when these students were lower down the school. The proportion of students making expected progress in mathematics across Key Stage 4 is still below average and this is not commensurate with good progress. Improvements in mathematics have, as yet, been too slow to take effect. As a result, achievement in mathematics remains the major stumbling block to Ellesmere Port Catholic High becoming a good school.

In Key Stage 3, the school has adopted an innovative approach to assessment without levels. Heads of department have had productive, professional discussions to reflect on the new National Curriculum. They have charted a trajectory of just what students should understand and be able to do in all subjects across Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. This approach is designed to build successfully on what students have already learned in their primary school. As this initiative is still at the early stage of implementation, it is throwing up some anomalies in terms of the data collected on students' progress. The school has established effective dialogue between individual teachers and departments to iron out these 'teething problems'. This is uncharted territory for all schools at the moment, but the school is 'ahead of the game' in terms of meeting the challenge. According to the school's information, students in Years 7 and 8 are making expected progress, but in Year 9 progress is not as good as there remains a legacy of underachievement from poor teaching in the past. Students in Key Stage 3 speak highly of the new system; they say they appreciate the valuable, clear information they receive on how to improve their work. Students spoken to during this inspection expressed the view that they feel they are making much better progress than formerly.

Disadvantaged students continue to make very good progress in several subjects, most particularly in English; these students are set to do better than all students nationally in this subject. This is a tribute to sustained, outstanding leadership and teaching in this area of the curriculum. This is not the case in mathematics which is having a deleterious impact on the overall progress of disadvantaged students. There remain some weaknesses in provision for students with special educational needs and those with disabilities, identified through the review of this area of the school's work. Appropriate action has been taken speedily in response to this review. However, as such initiatives are in the embryonic stage there is still too little evidence of impact.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching continues to improve in most areas of the curriculum. Teachers have responded well to the direction and high expectations of senior leaders. This improvement is particularly evident in science, which has improved dramatically since the previous inspection.

Teachers have benefited from a rich, well-constructed and diverse training programme designed to meet their individual needs. Teachers are now more confident in being creative when planning lessons. As a result, lessons are more varied and interesting. This is having a demonstrable impact on students' experience of school. For example, in a Year 9 English lesson observed during the inspection, there was a tangible buzz of excitement as students discussed poetry through the medium of song lyrics. Students spoken to during the inspection said that lessons are now more structured and that they appreciate the time dedicated to correcting their work in lessons; they feel this is helpful, because the teacher is on hand to explain exactly what they need to do to improve.

The regularity and effectiveness of marking continue to improve; however, it remains inconsistent. School leaders have set up a rigorous system to monitor the quality of marking, but they are aware that there is still work to be done to improve further. Helpful training has been provided for staff to support them to mark more effectively. This is further evidence of how the school adopts a 'carrot and stick' approach to school improvement: school leaders set out their stall to raise expectations, provide support for staff and then challenge them if they do not step up to the mark.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Strategies to improve behaviour are now well embedded. Attendance has improved substantially since this time last year. This measurable success is in part a consequence of initiatives that have been introduced, for example, incentives such as the Year 11 'Passport to the Prom', where students cannot attend the 'prom' if they have been absent too frequently. It is also a testament to the much-improved

quality of teaching: students come to school more regularly because they enjoy their lessons more than they used to and school leaders have been successful in convincing them of the importance of good attendance for their future prospects.

Student surveys show that, while there remain some isolated incidents of bullying, mainly calling people names, this has substantially diminished. Students spoken to during this inspection said teachers are firmer and apply policies more consistently. Senior leaders maintain a vigilant and visible presence around the school which, students say, has reduced incidences of low-level disruption.

During this monitoring inspection, students, without exception, were courteous and friendly. This school now has a very different ambiance compared to my first visit. As one student, spoken to during this visit, explained; 'This school used to be grimy and grey; it's now bright and inspirational'. Students' attitudes to learning were, more frequently than not, exemplary during this visit. Students demonstrate pride in their school and conviction in their headteacher; they feel she really cares about them as individuals and they feel 'listened to'.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Across all levels of leadership, improvement is tangible and exponential. The phenomenal pace of change is breathtaking. Under the exemplary direction of this inspirational and dedicated headteacher, the march forward has been, and continues to be, relentless.

Training for subject leaders has strengthened the culture of accountability, increasing middle leaders' skills and confidence in managing their colleagues and leading learning in their area of responsibility. The review of provision for students with special educational needs and those with disabilities has produced a clear way forward; the strategic plan for improvement is an example of very good practice with strong lines of accountability founded on aspiration for all students. The school now has a very clear line of sight for improvement in this area of its work.

The leadership of the sixth form goes from strength to strength. The breadth of advice and guidance that students receive is exemplary. School leaders have altered the conditions for entry to the sixth form, reflecting the higher expectations that have become a defining characteristic of the school as a whole. As a result, students are now on courses that are much better suited to their abilities, needs and interests. More effective use of study periods and a wider range of enrichment opportunities are helping to prepare students better for their future.

The leadership and management of information on students' progress are far more effective. On previous monitoring inspections, school leaders struggled to analyse clearly the copious quantity of data held on students' progress and there was little evidence to confirm its accuracy. More frequent assessment and sharper use of data

are generating much more reliable information on students' progress; this enables school leaders to have a much firmer grasp than formerly on strengths and remaining weaknesses, which then informs their next steps in eradicating underperformance.

The governing body has developed a profound understanding of the school's work and has grown immeasurably in its confidence in holding the school to account. Governors have developed an effective link to departments and continue to attend breakfast meetings at school to challenge subject leaders about their performance. The governing body, led astutely, humanely and expertly by the Chair, has a very clear understanding of the school's strengths and areas for further development. The governing body is an honest, loyal and dedicated group of individuals that serves the school very well as an increasingly knowledgeable and effective 'critical friend'.

External support

The school has received considerable support from the local authority since my previous monitoring inspection. The local authority has been particularly effective in handling a number of ongoing personnel issues, leaving the leadership of the school with more time to concentrate on school improvement. The school has also benefited considerably from financial support and guidance from the local authority in the form of regular 'school challenge' meetings and local authority reviews, where school leaders are rigorously held to account.

The school also continues to receive expert and honest advice from the representative of the diocese and from a number of local schools: Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic College Teaching School, St John Bosco Arts College and Tarporley High School.