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Mr John Toal
Headteacher
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St Helens
Merseyside
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Dear Mr Toal

Special measures monitoring inspection of De La Salle School

Following my visit with Ofsted Inspectors John Leigh and Steven Caldecott to your school on 8 and 9 December 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 third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in December 2014. 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:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection, in consultation with me and in subject areas where leadership and management have the capacity for effective support.

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 St Helens.

Yours sincerely

Julie Yarwood

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in December 2014

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning so that it is at least consistently good, by:
 - ensuring that teachers' expectations of what their students can achieve are high enough and based upon an accurate understanding of students' starting points
 - making sure that all students, in particular the disadvantaged and most able, are sufficiently challenged in lessons so that they have to think hard about their work and so deepen their understanding
 - ensuring that senior leaders maximise opportunities to drive up standards of teaching, including sharing with their colleagues the good practice that already exists in the school
 - making sure that the marking of students' work is effective so that students are clear about what they have done well and what they need to do to improve, and that teachers ensure that students act on this advice.

- Improve attainment and progress, particularly at GCSE, in English and mathematics and especially for disadvantaged students, those of middle ability and the most able, by:
 - ensuring that the data collected by senior leaders on students' performance are accurate, reliable and used to inform the extra help students need to keep them on track to meet challenging targets.

- Improve students' attitudes to learning, by:
 - maximising opportunities for students to take responsibility for their own learning, including making sure that teachers set appropriate homework, so that students' reliance on their teachers is lessened and they develop the skills to learn effectively across the curriculum.

- Improve leadership and management, by:
 - making sure that the monitoring and evaluation of how well the school is doing leads to decisive and rapid action to drive up standards
 - ensuring that the school improvement plan has a clear order of priorities, with appropriate timescales to enable staff and governors to identify which are the most important tasks that need to be done first in order to have the greatest and most rapid impact on students' outcomes
 - ensuring that careers advice and guidance provide students with precise information about the possible long-term impact of their subject option choices at Key Stage 4.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 8 and 9 December 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, senior and middle leaders, four groups of pupils, a representative from the local authority and a group of three governors including the Chair of the Governing Body. A telephone conversation was held with a representative of the Catholic Archdiocese and a tour of the school with the headteacher took place. Inspectors visited morning tutorials and observed lessons across the school and in a range of subject areas. Four of the lesson observations were conducted jointly with senior leaders. Inspectors looked at the work of pupils in lessons and conducted a separate scrutiny of a sample of pupils' work from Year 9. The work scrutiny was carried out jointly with two senior leaders.

Context

A new headteacher took up post in September 2015. At the end of the summer term, six teachers and eight non-teaching staff left the school and five teachers and eight non-teaching colleagues joined in September. The school's single central record of employment checks has been amended accordingly.

Five progress leaders have been appointed from within the existing staff to oversee the progress of pupils in each year group. Three middle leaders have been seconded temporarily to the senior leadership team to bring additional capacity to this team.

The headteacher and governors are in the process of formulating their future staffing structure in order to address a significant budget deficit.

Outcomes for pupils

In summer 2015, the proportion of pupils gaining five grades A* to C including English and mathematics showed an encouraging improvement. This figure was significantly above the national average for the first time in a number of years. The proportion of pupils making expected progress in English improved and was above the national average. The proportion making better than expected progress in this subject also improved and was broadly in line with the national figure. In mathematics, the proportions of pupils making expected and better than expected progress in mathematics were broadly in line with national figures. However, the overall progress made by pupils, when compared with the progress of those with similar starting points nationally, was below national levels in mathematics, science and modern foreign languages. The school's predictions for performance in a number of subject areas were over-generous.

The gaps in performance between disadvantaged pupils and others nationally remained wide and closing these gaps continues to be a key focus for school leaders. Leaders have completed an honest evaluation of their work in this area and have amended some of the strategies that they are using. There is now much more focused tracking of the performance of this group of pupils and leaders are drawing on a range of sources, including national research and proven strategies in other schools, to support their work in this area. For pupils currently in school, there is evidence of the narrowing of some gaps but this is not yet consistent across all year groups.

Pupils' targets have been amended and are highly aspirational. The school has invested much effort in developing targets in line with the best levels of achievement nationally. There is now a need for the refinement of these targets in some subject areas to take greater account of pupils' starting points. This refinement is needed to ensure that the targets that are set are entirely appropriate for individual pupils.

There is currently variability in the progress made by pupils in the school. In some areas of the curriculum, progress is strong, but in others, progress remains much weaker and the standard of work produced falls far short of expectations and targets. Leaders are now tracking achievement and conducting quality assurance of work more carefully to enable these issues to be tackled.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The quality of teaching is improving and there is a growing culture of openness in discussing and sharing teaching and learning strategies. Teachers demonstrate good subject knowledge and inspectors observed positive relationships between teachers and pupils and the appropriate use of praise to provide encouragement. Where teaching was seen to be most effective, a range of strategies to engage pupils were used and the work was pitched at an appropriately challenging level, taking into account pupils' starting points. Effective questioning encouraged pupils to build on their initial response and develop their thinking and teachers moved around the classroom to support learning effectively. As a result, pupils were seen to be making strong progress over time in some areas.

The quality of teaching is, however, not yet consistently effective across the school and is polarised between the strongest and weakest practice. Inspectors saw evidence of some teaching which was still pitched at an inappropriately low level and weak questioning which failed to challenge thinking. As a result, pupils' progress fell far short of targets and expectations in these areas.

The quality of the marking of pupils' work shows improvement. Some very strong examples of marking giving clear guidance to pupils on how to improve their work were seen. This advice was then subsequently acted on by pupils. High-quality marking was noted particularly in English. Some marking does not yet fully follow

the school's policy and there remains a need to ensure that marking consistently makes clear to pupils how they should improve their work. There is more to be done to share the examples of highly effective practice that are evident in school.

There are increasing opportunities for teachers to discuss strategies and take part in professional development to improve and share their practice. However, these opportunities are not yet strategically calendared across the year and, as a result, it is not possible to see at a glance how the training programme is designed to build up and support ongoing development nor how the specific impact of each aspect of the training is being evaluated.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils show generally positive attitudes towards their learning. They are polite to each other, to staff and to visitors and they wear their uniform smartly. Inspectors observed a small amount of low-level disruption in lessons, but this was not the norm. Rates of exclusion in recent years have been below national averages, but there has been an increase in the number of exclusions in the first term of this academic year compared with the same period last year. Leaders attribute this to higher expectations and the implementation of a new policy. Some pupils who were spoken to by an inspector commented that they felt that the school had become stricter.

The overall level of attendance for pupils is strong and in the last academic year was above the national average. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils is, however, of concern and there remains a gap in attendance between this group of pupils and others. School leaders have re-evaluated their strategies to tackle this and have recognised the need to engage parents more proactively through home visits. The rate of attendance for some pupils attending alternative provision is very low and further work to address this issue is needed.

Pupils commented that homework was being set and that they appreciated the new online system, but some felt that the homework was not always useful as it sometimes did not relate directly to the work that they had been completing in class.

Pupils feel safe and are safe in school. They comment that any instances of bullying are dealt with effectively and they are clear about who to speak to if they have concerns.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The newly appointed headteacher has a clear and aspirational vision for the school. In a short period of time, he has earned the respect of staff and pupils and is bringing consistent leadership to the school. This has been achieved despite being faced with the challenging issue of a previously unidentified and significant budget

deficit. Working closely with the governing body and the local authority, he has wasted no time in putting robust steps in motion to tackle this issue.

The roles and responsibilities of the members of the senior leadership team have been adjusted; the roles are now more clearly defined and include both pastoral and academic responsibilities. There is evidence, as a result, of greater clarity and an increased sense of ownership and accountability among the team.

Senior leaders have introduced a calendared programme of quality assurance activities to monitor the work of the school more thoroughly and raise expectations. Middle leaders are fully involved in this programme and take part in lesson observations, work scrutiny, pupil voice activities and learning walks to monitor the work of their departments. There is increasing use of moderation of pupils' work in departments to ensure consistency and accuracy of assessment, but this process is in its infancy in Key Stage 3.

Although there is evidence of some significant strengths and positive impact on pupils' progress, there remains variability in the effectiveness of middle leaders in the proactive use of data to address underperformance in their departments. There is a need for greater sharing of good practice among the group to ensure that all middle leaders are fully equipped with the skills to challenge and hold their team members to account.

Senior leaders recognise that the quality of teaching, and consequently the outcomes achieved by pupils, is not yet where they need to be. There is evidence of some effective challenge taking place from senior colleagues where poor performance is identified. Leaders use a grading system to evaluate the quality of teaching and its impact on pupils' progress, but the meanings of the grades are unclear, as there are currently no explicit grade descriptors in use. In addition, although the strengths and weaknesses of teaching are identified, there is no strategic summary of these by departments, which means that it is not possible to identify tightly where the best pairings to share specific aspects of practice exist in school.

Leaders have now fully implemented the change to ensure that all tutor groups are year-group specific. This change has been well received and has resulted in better levels of year-group specific support. Progress leaders are now assigned to year groups. This move is enhancing communication within school and with parents and is enabling a greater consistency of follow-up to any issues. It is too early to assess the impact of these developments on pupils' progress.

Further work has taken place to strengthen the careers advice and guidance received by pupils. A recent example of this was the creative arts subject fair which took place over a lunchtime break. This gave pupils an opportunity to consider the range of careers available within the creative arts industry and the qualifications

linked to this. Leaders commented that they had specifically targeted pupils in Years 8 and 9, as the event was being held prior to pupils choosing their options subjects. It is particularly important that this work takes place early in Key Stage 3, as new plans for the curriculum mean that pupils in the present Year 8 will be selecting their options subjects during this academic year and will be completing a three-year Key Stage 4 programme.

Performance management processes have been strengthened to include quality assurance of the achievement of standards. There is scope for greater sharpening of some of the targets set to ensure that the outcomes are measurable with quantifiable impact.

The governing body offers strong challenge and support to the leadership of the school and their use of probing questions is evident in the minutes of their meetings. Governors were not previously made aware of looming budgetary difficulties and they have recognised that the absence of a future financial projection was a key issue for them.

External support

The local authority continues to provide strong and effective support for the new headteacher, school leaders and governors. This support is providing valuable professional guidance and an external check on planning and processes. As a result, it is helping to increase the confidence of senior leaders in their roles.

The school is increasingly outward-facing and is drawing on the support of other schools in the local authority to seek expertise in specific areas. This has included strategies to help meet the needs of disadvantaged pupils. In addition, the headteacher has maintained links with his previous school and curriculum links have started to become established. These links involve reciprocal visits to share practice and strategies. School leaders have also deployed external support in moderating the mock examinations of pupils in Year 11 in English to provide a further check on the validity of assessment levels.