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17 December 2015

Declan Linnane
Headteacher
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Colney Heath Lane
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Dear Mr Linnane

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Nicholas Breakspear Catholic School

Following my visit to your school on 2 December 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 second 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 section 5 inspection in order to become a good school. The school should take further action to:

- ensure that different groups of pupils make equally good progress.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, the executive headteacher, three senior leaders, four middle leaders and a group of seven pupils. I observed four lessons jointly with senior leaders and reviewed monitoring records of teaching. In addition, I checked safeguarding documentation, evaluated the school's self-evaluation and action plan and analysed information about pupils' progress.

Context

Since the first monitoring visit, seven new members of staff have joined the school following the departure of staff at the end of the summer term. 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.

Main findings

Since the first monitoring visit, you have:

- raised the standards attained by pupils
- improved pupils' attendance
- increased the proportion of good and outstanding teaching
- widened the roles and responsibilities that pupils develop
- strengthened the impact of senior and middle leaders.

The high aspirations for the school that you, your staff and the governors share are more explicit to pupils, parents and carers than at the time of the first monitoring visit. For example, the school website and computer resources used for homework better reflect your priority to improve the quality of pupils' learning and achievement. Profiles of pupils who achieved particularly well in 2014/15 and their destinations, displayed throughout the school, contribute to the culture of pride in doing well. Your new gallery of high-quality artwork further supports your evaluation that the school is developing different pupils' skills well. The additional challenges you are providing for the most-able pupils show that staff are using assessment accurately to focus on groups that could do better still.

Your work to improve the achievement of disadvantaged pupils at the school is helping them to catch up with their peers. However, the gap is still too wide. Your strategy to provide top-quality teaching by subject leaders for this group is proving effective. Nevertheless, your expectations of disadvantaged pupils should be raised further to ensure that the standards they attain are as high as those of other pupils. Those pupils supported by a 'raising achievement plan' (RAP) benefit from the intensive focus that all staff give. In addition to plans initiated by teachers and support staff, examples of pupils who have requested a RAP show that 'getting to good' is a mission shared by both staff and pupils. Progress leaders are using information about pupils' achievement and attitudes to learning increasingly well. This includes joint work scrutinies with subject leaders, which are helping to reduce inconsistencies in performance between subjects.

Middle leaders' monitoring and evaluation are strengthening the school's capacity to improve further. The leaders for mathematics, English and science discussed very specific aspects of subject teaching and the curriculum that they have improved and are improving. This approach complements the wider and often innovative work to refine teaching that is led by senior leaders. For example, staff training focused on meeting pupils' diverse needs has been followed up by frequent sharing of ideas and approaches. This includes pupils' views. For example, the most-able pupils in Year 13 have contributed by analysing the learning that really deepens their knowledge

and understanding. This initiative is part of your wider strategy to increase the roles and responsibilities that pupils develop.

Pupils have responded very positively to the 'behaviour stack' that makes expectations explicit, including rewards for good behaviour. Exclusions and use of other sanctions are declining. Additional opportunities for Year 11 pupils to become prefects, the introduction of a house system to promote support between year groups and anti-bullying initiatives led by pupils are indicative of the school's work to promote pupils' personal development. Conscious of the high proportion of boys that attend the school, off-site activities to develop the resilience and confidence of girls show that senior leaders and governors are active in promoting equality of opportunity. This is having a positive impact on achievement. For example, current work by pupils with disabilities and those with special educational needs indicates improved progress for this group. In 2015, sustained and significant improvement in mathematics in particular contributed to the above-average proportion of Year 11 pupils that left the school with five or more A*–C grades in GCSEs, including English and mathematics. Pupils' higher achievement also contributed to improved retention into the sixth form.

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 continues to make effective use of work with schools in the diocese and the support provided by the local authority. This includes a recent review of the school's progress. Governors share the strong commitment of senior leaders to rapid improvement and contribute through their duties, roles and responsibilities linked to improvement priorities.

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

Yours sincerely

Ian Middleton
Her Majesty's Inspector