

Ofsted  
Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231  
Textphone: 0161 618 8524  
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk  
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Dr Marcella McCarthy  
Principal  
St Gregory the Great Catholic Secondary School  
Cricket Road  
Cowley  
Oxford  
OX4 3DR

Dear Dr McCarthy

### **Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Gregory the Great Catholic Secondary School**

Following my visit to your school on 14 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, your staff and pupils 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 March 2015. 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 in order to become a good school.

### **Evidence**

During the inspection, I met with you, senior and middle leaders, three members of the governing body and a representative from the Dominic Barberi Multi Academy Company to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the academy's improvement plan and self-evaluation document and reviewed outcomes from the recent external reviews of governance and pupil premium, and information about pupils' achievement and attendance. Together, we observed teaching and learning across Key Stages 3 and 4 in English, mathematics, science, French, and design and technology. I also met with 23 pupils from Years 7 to 11. After the inspection, I spoke briefly by telephone to a representative from the Diocese.

## **Context**

Since the last inspection, the senior leadership team has been restructured and there have been changes to the organisation of tutor groups.

## **Main findings**

The Principal, with support from senior leaders, has acted quickly to improve leadership at all levels and provision. As a result, there are early signs of improving outcomes for pupils and steady progress towards becoming a good school.

Leadership structures, which were unwieldy at the time of the last inspection, have been streamlined. Leaders are now more focused on their core responsibilities and the priorities for improvement. Self-evaluation is thoughtful and accurate; it offers a balanced view of what has improved set against a realistic assessment of what is not yet good enough. Improvement plans are detailed and linked to development priorities. However, impact measures are sometimes too general and the criteria for evaluating whether actions have been successful are often difficult to measure.

Through strengthened links with departments, visits to lessons and talking to pupils, governors have gained a better understanding of strengths and weaknesses in teaching. They are now involved more fully in decisions about teachers' pay and performance, asking leaders to make a strong link between rewards and pupils' achievement. Governors have implemented most recommendations from the external review of governance and are holding leaders more strongly to account. For example, they now expect meeting papers to be tabled 48 hours in advance, so that there is time to digest information and formulate more challenging and evaluative questions.

Middle leaders have increased confidence in using information about pupils' progress to hold teachers to account and to identify underperformance. They monitor teaching more consistently and make sure that the right support and challenge is in place to help teachers develop. Leaders at all levels check that staff apply the improved policies on teaching and behaviour consistently.

Training for staff is more focused on the most important priorities for development and there are increased opportunities to share effective practice, facilitated by the newly formed teaching and culture team (TACT). As a result, the quality of teaching is improving steadily across subject areas. Nevertheless, more needs to be done to improve the consistency of day-to-day teaching and to support teachers to plan more successfully to meet the needs of all pupils, especially in Key Stage 3.

Pupils reported that they are now working harder in lessons and making better progress in most subjects. Overall, teaching is more engaging, more challenging and more focused on what pupils need to learn to make better progress and prepare for

external examinations. Nevertheless, pupils also recognise inconsistencies in teaching across the school and within subjects. On occasions, particularly in Key Stage 3, the pace of learning is too slow and work is repeated. In Key Stage 4, where work is generally more challenging, some pupils feel rushed when teachers do not provide sufficient time to consolidate learning. These views are substantiated by inspection evidence and the school's own monitoring.

Although still embedding, the literacy across the curriculum strategy and the whole-school 'PUSH' (pen, underline, sentence and handwriting) policy have led to improved accuracy and presentation in pupils' work.

New tutor group arrangements enable staff to monitor pupils' academic and social development more effectively. Behaviour is improving as a result of more consistent expectations about attitudes, punctuality and uniform. Pupils broadly welcome the 'stricter' approach as it leads to a calmer and more purposeful atmosphere. Nevertheless, a small minority of pupils find it difficult to behave well all of the time.

Staff work closely with pupils and families to reduce absence. Strengthened systems are beginning to have a positive impact. Attendance is improving, albeit slowly, and the number of pupils who find it difficult to attend school regularly has fallen. Overall, there have been improvements in the attendance of disadvantaged pupils. Currently, attendance is strongest in Key Stage 3 but too low in Year 10. Leaders recognise that more needs to be done to ensure attendance improves across all year groups, including in Key Stage 1.

Overall, the achievement of pupils in Year 11 who completed their external examinations in 2015 was similar to 2014. The gap between disadvantaged pupils and others nationally narrowed slightly when compared with the previous year. Inspection evidence and progress tracking information show a steady increase in the achievement of pupils currently in the school. Nevertheless, leaders acknowledge that rates of progress need to increase more quickly, especially in Key Stage 3.

In Year 1, some pupils' performance in the phonics check was lower than expected. Leaders recognise that those children enrolled in the school for some time performed better than those who transferred to the school part way through the year. Leaders are monitoring this issue closely and taking actions to minimise its impact.

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

### **External support**

Leaders in the school are outward looking and make judicious use of external support and partnerships with other schools to help drive improvement.

External reviews of governance and the pupil premium were thorough, helpful and led to practical recommendations that the school is implementing sensibly. The governance review led to improved committee structures and a more systematic approach to holding leaders to account. Leaders responded promptly to findings from the external review of pupil premium. Spending decisions are now more focused on activities that have the potential to raise achievement. Information about spending and its impact is presented more clearly and in some detail on the website but needs to be more easily accessible to parents.

The school is at the heart of the Dominic Barberi Multi Academy Company. Directors are knowledgeable about the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Recently, they have brokered support for the Principal from another successful school. They are also strengthening central support for operational matters, such as site maintenance and health and safety, so that leaders can focus fully on improving provision and raising achievement. These interventions are new or planned for and have not yet had time to impact fully on helping the school to improve. In discussion with the Principal, the trust should now make sure that, over time, appropriate support is available across primary, secondary and sixth form phases.

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

Yours sincerely

Christopher Wood

**Her Majesty's Inspector**