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Mrs Clare Hogg
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Hogg

Short inspection of St Thomas More Catholic High School, A Catholic Academy

Following my visit to the academy on 21 January 2016 with Mark Williams, Senior Her Majesty's Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since your school was judged to be good in April 2012.

This academy continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the academy since the last inspection. Most of the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection have been tackled effectively.

You and other senior leaders have a clear idea of where the academy is strong and where it can improve further. Although several members of the senior leadership team have been in 'acting' roles for several months, the academy has not stood still but has moved forward rapidly in focusing the attention of staff on improving outcomes.

Since the last inspection, more is being expected from middle leaders. They are now more effective in monitoring pupils' progress than in the past, including checking whether differences occur in the progress of different groups. More subjects are providing accurate predictions of pupils' GCSE results. Middle leaders are less effective in monitoring the quality of teaching: some feedback gives too little emphasis to pupils' learning, such as whether pupils are matching the progress expected of them or actually making better than expected progress.

The academy's improvement plan identifies the right priorities. Alongside senior leaders and governors, you have created a culture of being open, honest and self-

critical. You have made good use of external consultants to provide effective support for leaders and teachers.

The impact of their actions on pupils' outcomes demonstrates leaders' capacity to bring about further improvements. The academy has maintained high standards over a sustained period, with an improving trend compared with national figures in the proportion of pupils gaining five or more good GCSEs including English and mathematics. The academy has succeeded in reducing gaps between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and others in the academy, particularly in mathematics. Disadvantaged pupils are making better progress than in the past, particularly in Key Stage 3, where gaps between their performance and that of other pupils are small. Where underachievement of a particular group or in a particular subject has been identified, the academy has responded quickly and effectively. For example, a drop in boys' performance in 2015 prompted additional support that has led to improved progress for boys currently in the academy; forecasts for 2016 show high proportions of boys making the expected progress in English and mathematics.

The quality of teaching in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science is at the heart of pupils' enjoyment of learning. Teachers have high expectations and, as a result, pupils strive to achieve their challenging targets. Exercise books show evidence of pupils' engagement in their learning and the care they take over their work. Teachers create an atmosphere where pupils are not afraid to have a go and be wrong. When they are unsure of the work, pupils ask for help but only after they have tried for themselves. Teachers' focus on improving pupils' grammar and punctuation is having a positive impact. Teachers' application of the academy's assessment policy is beginning to help pupils to know more clearly how they can improve their work.

At the last inspection, pupils' behaviour was graded as outstanding. Pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare remain impressive and a clear strength of the academy. Pupils confirmed that behaviour is typically very good and that disruption to learning is rare. The curriculum continues to support pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development very well.

Safeguarding is effective.

The academy's commitment to safeguarding contributes strongly to pupils' sense of well-being. All staff have undergone recent training, including in the duty to protect pupils from developing extremist views.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. The academy has appropriate procedures for minimising risks to pupils and to protect pupils who are identified as vulnerable. Through the planned curriculum, supported by presentations from visiting speakers, pupils learn about how to keep themselves safe, including when using the internet. For example, pupils understand that cyberbullying can happen

anywhere and, as one boy said, is 'hard to get away from'. Responses to the pupil questionnaire confirm that pupils feel safe and know that there is always an adult in school that they can talk to.

Inspection findings

- Governors are a committed group who provide both support and challenge. They share your ambitions for the academy and bring a range of appropriate skills to the role. They are aware of where in the academy pupils make the best progress and are increasingly holding individual subject leaders to account. Recent training has helped them to feel better equipped to fulfil their role effectively.
- You have identified that teaching and pupils' progress are not as strong in some humanities and technology subjects as elsewhere in the academy and have a strategy in place to provide appropriate support.
- Leaders ensure that pupils receive good-quality information, advice and guidance. As a result, pupils feel confident that they can make informed choices when selecting their optional subjects at the end of Key Stage 3 or their place of study after leaving Year 11.
- Parents and staff expressed positive views of pupils' behaviour and the effectiveness with which leaders and teachers respond to any incidents of poor behaviour that occur. We observed a calm, quiet atmosphere in lessons and around the academy.
- Attendance is consistently above average, with little variation between groups. Those attending alternative provision for part of the week have good records of attendance and behaviour.
- Pupils say that they feel safe in school. Of those who responded to the pupil questionnaire, many said that bullying does not happen; almost all of the rest said that when it occurs, teachers are good at resolving it.
- Overall progress measures have been significantly above average for each of the last three years. Progress has been particularly strong in English, mathematics and modern foreign languages.
- In 2015, the proportions making and exceeding expected progress in English were above average for each ability band, and particularly so for pupils entering the academy with below-average levels of attainment. The proportions making the expected progress in mathematics were above or well above average for each ability band.
- Some required information that was temporarily missing from the academy's website has now been restored.

Next steps for the academy

Leaders and governors should ensure that they develop the skills of middle leaders further so that they evaluate teaching more rigorously.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Cheshire East. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Paul Chambers
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, meetings were held with you and other leaders in the academy, members of the governing body and groups of pupils.

Inspectors made visits to several lessons to observe teaching, including two that were made jointly with a member of the senior leadership team. Inspectors spoke to pupils about their work and scrutinised pupils' written work. One inspector had a telephone conversation with a member of staff at Reaseheath College, where a small number of pupils attend for part of the week.

Inspectors considered a range of documentary evidence, including the academy's self-evaluation, documents about keeping pupils safe, assessment records and minutes of meetings of the governing body.

Inspectors took account of 42 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including the 31 that included written comments, and the views of one parent expressed in a telephone conversation. They also took account of 38 responses to the pupil questionnaire and 61 responses to the staff questionnaire.