

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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Mr Phil Mooney
St Mary's Catholic High School
Royal Avenue
Leyland
Lancashire
PR25 1BS

Dear Mr Mooney

Special measures monitoring inspection of St Mary's Catholic High School

Following my visit with Elizabeth Haddock, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 15 and 16 March 2016, 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 that 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 that took place in October 2014. The full list of the areas for improvement that 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.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the archdiocese of Liverpool, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Lancashire County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sally Kenyon
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in October 2014

- Urgently, improve the impact of leadership and management at all levels, including governance by:
 - improving communication between governors, school leaders and staff to rebuild broken relationships so staff can work as a cohesive team with a unity of purpose
 - reducing staff absence so that students' learning is not disrupted and is more consistent
 - monitoring teaching more rigorously and ensuring that teachers are perfectly clear about which aspects need to be improved, in order to eradicate teaching that leads to progress which is less than good
 - developing the role of leaders in charge of subjects so that they are more accountable for the quality of teaching in their departments and for the progress their students make
 - providing governors with clear information about the progress of all groups of students in all subjects in all years, so that governors are able to hold the school to account more effectively for students' academic performance
 - checking regularly that strategies for improvement undertaken by the school are having the desired impact
 - ensuring that the school's website is compliant with the Department for Education regulations
 - responding to the letter received from the Department for Education in January 2014 requiring that an external review be carried out into the performance of disadvantaged students and ensuring that governors act swiftly on any recommendations of that review
 - improving the behaviour of a small minority of students, including some who attend part-time provision off site.
 - checking that students are taught how to keep themselves and others safe.

- Improve the quality of teaching so that all students, particularly those who are disadvantaged, those of middle and lower ability, and those who are disabled or have special educational needs, achieve well in all subjects, especially in science and humanities, by:
 - making sure that teachers set targets for students that are appropriately challenging, and reviewing those targets regularly
 - planning and teaching lessons that meet the needs of all students
 - raising teachers' expectations of students' capabilities, in order to ensure that the work students are given to do stretches them, makes them think hard and deepens their understanding

- taking immediate steps to address gaps in students' knowledge and understanding in order to make up for weaknesses in teaching over time
- ensuring that marking gives specific advice on how students can improve their work and providing students with opportunities to respond to the advice given
- insisting that all students take a pride in the presentation and quality of work they produce.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 15 and 16 March 2016

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team, a group of middle leaders, members of the governing body and a representative from the local authority. Inspectors listened to the opinions of a wide range of pupils both formally and at social times. Inspectors spoke to five parents.

Context

A few teachers have left since the previous monitoring visit and several new teachers will take up post in April and September. The school has a significant budget deficit. Fewer pupils have been recruited to Year 7 in 2016. A small number of staff have agreed to take voluntary redundancy.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

A credible senior leadership team is taking shape. There is greater strength now in the leadership and management of achievement, curriculum, teaching and learning and special educational needs. Members of staff who responded to Ofsted's survey support the new leadership and feel proud to be a part of the school. The only negative feedback reported in the survey was that a very small minority of staff felt that they were not treated equally.

Governors have taken a lead role in establishing strong links with middle leaders and listening directly to pupils' views. Greater challenge is evident in the minutes of governors' meetings. Governors are now able to verify much of the information they are given by senior leaders as a result of first-hand experience of school life including speaking directly with pupils.

Assessment information provided to governors is more reliable than at the last visit. This is due to some highly effective support from the local authority. The leadership and management of achievement has improved further. Leaders accurately identify the progress of specific groups and are using this information to take swift and timely action when underachievement occurs.

The impact of pupil premium funding on pupils' outcomes has been evaluated; leaders and managers now carefully consider how they can use the money to have the greatest the impact on achievement. Funding continues to bring about improvements in the support of pupils' personal and social development and their attendance.

The leadership and management of teaching and learning continues to improve. A

wealth of professional development has taken place since the previous visit. Some 'green shoots' of improvement can be seen in lessons including teachers providing better support for pupils' writing. However, the impact of this training is diluted by the unpredictable nature of staff absence. Much of the school's reliance on temporary teachers is as a result of senior leaders making the necessary challenges to underperformance and filling gaps while they wait for new appointments to start.

Senior leaders and governors have clear and accurate priorities to continue the school's improvement. However, there is currently no over-arching plan to identify who will take the lead on aspects of school improvement or what impact governors wish to see. This is a missed opportunity to use the now strengthened leadership team to its full potential in order to accelerate improvements.

The leadership and management of behaviour is a weakness. The behaviour observed at this monitoring inspection was not as good as it was at the inspection in January 2016; there has been some slippage. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, there are not enough staff on duty at social times, leading to some low-level boisterous behaviour going unchecked. Secondly, the most senior staff are drawn into covering lessons themselves rather than circulating the corridors during lesson time. This is leading to minor, but important, inequalities in the application of the behaviour policy.

There remains untapped capacity to strengthen the leadership and management of behaviour from departments within school where behaviour management is known to be strong, such as physical education.

There are still key gaps in behaviour and safeguarding policies. For example, it is not spelled out to parents or pupils what their rights and responsibilities are regarding the appropriate use of social media, staying safe online and what the law says regarding sexually explicit material.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

There are some good examples of staff using the training they have received to plan appropriate work for pupils of different abilities but there is still too much inconsistency in the quality of teaching and the presentation of work. There are too many instances where pupils are not stretched by their work, which limits their progress.

Where teaching is of good quality, pupils' learning is strong and sustained. This was seen in a Year 8 food technology lesson where pupils made good progress due to the teacher's careful planning and high expectations. Scrutiny of pupils' work booklets showed excellent presentation, spellings corrected, technical vocabulary used well and incisive feedback – resulting in pupils making better progress. However, this good practice is not consistent across the school.

The special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) has given all staff specific information about what to provide for pupils in their classes. Some staff use this information to good effect and some do not use it at all.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Attendance continues to improve due to strong, strategic leadership. Gaps are beginning to close between the attendance of different groups of pupils and their peers as a result of careful tracking and well-targeted interventions.

Pupil premium money is having a positive impact on pupils' well-being through the work of the 'lunch-time club'. This club provides a pleasant place for pupils who prefer a quiet environment in which to have their lunch.

Behaviour in lessons and social times is generally orderly and many pupils report that behaviour in their classes is good. Some boisterous behaviour was observed by inspectors in areas where staff were not on duty. Crucially, when behaviour falls below the high standards expected and is challenged by staff, pupils respond immediately.

However, in a small number of classes pupils report, and inspectors observed, that there is some off-task, disengagement predominantly, but not exclusively, in classes that have had a number of temporary teachers. This behaviour is not consistently well challenged.

The behaviour and progress of those pupils who are educated off-site is not known; while regular reports of their attendance and progress are received, no one has been to check how they match up to the day-to-day quality of provision.

Personal development is a key weakness of the curriculum. Personal, social and health education does not feature prominently enough in pupils' weekly learning. Pupils' knowledge about how to keep themselves safe when using their mobile phones and what constitutes inappropriate use of social media is weak.

Outcomes for pupils

Too much of pupils' day-to-day diet of teaching involves temporary, supply or cover teachers; this is negatively affecting pupils' progress. Pupils' academic targets are still under review. Assessment information presented to inspectors shows a promising picture of achievement for this year's GCSE examinations.

The proportion of pupils who will leave with 5 GCSEs at grade C or above is predicted to be securely above the national average, although assessment information is not yet completely reliable. Much work has been done to standardise and moderate teachers' assessments to some good effect.

New leadership in science and humanities is beginning to have an impact on raising standards. However, predictions for science are very reliant on the outcomes of pupils' next assessment and the quality of teaching across the school is still very variable.

External support

The local authority has provided good support to develop the use of information about pupils' progress. Although there is still a degree of caution around the accuracy of assessment information, leaders and managers can locate information about the progress of different groups much more quickly and efficiently.

Some support from the local authority has been withdrawn too quickly. The school's capacity to make further improvements is still dependent on external support. This is because not only are leaders and managers having to cope with a significant budget deficit, they are also managing voluntary redundancies, high staff absence, changes to the curriculum and a legacy of underachievement at Key Stage 4.