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Mr Andrew Ramsey
Headteacher
St Michael's Catholic Academy
Beamish Road
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Dear Mr Ramsey

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Michael's Catholic Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 10 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 academy since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in June 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 academy.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, senior and middle leaders, a group of teachers, representatives of the governing body and representatives of Carmel Education Trust. I examined academy documents and evaluated the academy's improvement plan. I visited classes with senior leaders, had discussions with pupils and examined the work in their books and folders.

Context

Three senior leaders and four middle leaders have been appointed since the last section 5 inspection.

Main findings

The headteacher and senior leaders are taking swift and decisive action to tackle the weaknesses identified at the last section 5 inspection. The academy's drive for improvement is underpinned by a strong moral purpose, much higher expectations and greater collective accountability.

The monitoring of teaching quality is more systematic and rigorous. As a result, senior leaders have an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses in teaching and know what needs to be done to move to good. Teachers value the training, guidance and support they receive and welcome the expectation that consistently good teaching is the norm at St Michael's.

The quality of marking and feedback has improved considerably since the last inspection. At its best, marking is detailed and diagnostic and, as a consequence, pupils know exactly how to improve the standard of their work. Teachers are making better use of performance information to plan lessons which build on pupils' prior knowledge, skills and understanding. However, pockets of less effective teaching remain and, at times, the weaknesses identified at the last inspection persist.

Overall attendance and the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs are beginning to improve. Carefully targeted strategies are starting to impact on the attendance of individual pupils and key groups. Crucially, however, levels of persistent absence remain high and more needs to be done to tackle the poor or irregular attendance of a few pupils.

There was demonstrable improvement in the progress and attainment of Year 11 pupils in 2015. Disadvantaged pupils made faster progress and started to close the gap on non-disadvantaged pupils. However, this gap is not closing quickly enough for pupils in Years 7, 8 and 9, especially in English.

The academy's improvement plan is closely linked to the areas for improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection. However, it does not have measurable step-by-step targets for improvement in pupils' attendance, progress and attainment. As a consequence, it is difficult for senior leaders to check whether the academy is on track to become a good school at its next inspection.

Governors have an in-depth knowledge of the academy's strengths and weaknesses. They check the information that they receive from senior leaders carefully and take steps to assure its accuracy and reliability. Governors ask searching questions about the quality of teaching and the progress made by pupils.

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

External support

Carmel Education Trust has added much to the academy's drive for improvement. Support is well targeted and colleagues from the trust provide detailed and accurate reports on important areas of the academy's performance. However, more needs to be done to tackle the remaining pockets of less effective teaching.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Nick Whittaker
Her Majesty's Inspector