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Mr C Smith
Principal
St Margaret Ward Catholic Academy
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Dear Mr Smith

Short inspection of St Margaret Ward Catholic Academy

Following my visit to the school on 4 May 2016 with Elizabeth Ellis-Martin, Ofsted 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 predecessor school was judged to be good in February 2013.

This school continues to be good.

St Margaret Ward Catholic Academy is a vibrant and welcoming school that radiates a shared ethos that everyone is a valuable and valued individual. You, supported by leaders, governors and directors, have built a strong community, established on shared values, where, as one pupil told inspectors, 'everyone has a place and they belong to the school'. One parent described the school as 'providing a safe, caring, positive, rewarding environment in which my child can learn, develop, thrive and realise his potential, encouraged by the school leadership team, his teachers, fellow pupils and friends'.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Areas for improvement that were identified in that report have been tackled and improvement is evident in these areas. The previous inspection report directed leaders to address the time allocation for separate science subjects at GCSE and to improve leadership and progress in the sixth form.

Since the last inspection, leaders have provided additional curriculum time for GCSE physics, chemistry and biology and results have improved. Leadership of the sixth form is now strong. A-level results, which had been improving, dipped in 2014. Leaders' analysis of why this had happened led to a speedy response that saw results improve in 2015. The school's internal assessment information indicates that

there will be further improvement in 2016. Ensuring that teaching in the sixth form leads to consistently good progress remains a key focus area for leaders.

At the end of Year 11, pupils make good or better progress in many subjects. This is particularly true for disadvantaged pupils, lower-attaining pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and disabilities. Leaders, teachers and other adults make sure that these pupils receive excellent support, both in lessons and at other times. This helps them to catch up when they fall behind and so maintain consistently good progress.

Achievement in mathematics is very high indeed because of the strong leadership of a well-qualified, dedicated and innovative team of teachers. Achievement in some subjects, including science, French, history and geography lags behind other subjects, although there was some improvement in 2015. The school's internal assessment information, which has been accurate in the past, indicates that there will be further improvement in these subjects in 2016.

Relationships between pupils and teachers are excellent throughout the school. Many pupils told inspectors that their teachers are approachable, supportive and always ready to 'go the extra mile' to help them with their work, or with any problems that might be worrying them. Teachers have strong subject knowledge and they provide their pupils with thoughtful feedback that helps them improve their work.

Leaders' explicit focus on developing pupils' personal development is a strength of the school. Staff model the shared values of respect and forgiveness and pupils respond by demonstrating excellent attitudes to others and to their learning. Pupils who had joined the school after the start of Year 7 are fulsome in their praise for St Margaret Ward Catholic Academy, and especially for the support that they had been given by staff and their peers.

Safeguarding is effective.

The care that adults provide to pupils in the school begins with a commitment to keeping them safe, and all staff understand their responsibilities in this area. All members of staff have been comprehensively trained in aspects of child protection and safeguarding, including the dangers posed by the internet and the duty to prevent pupils from being exposed to extreme or radical messages. Consequently, staff are knowledgeable, alert to potential dangers and confident in reporting any concerns that they might have.

Safeguarding policies are up to date and supplemented by a range of helpful advice for parents and pupils. Records are stored securely, they are detailed and of high quality. Governors and directors are well trained and they carry out their duties with diligence. The nominated safeguarding governor visits the school regularly and checks that arrangements are fit for purpose, for example by scrutinising the employment checks that have been made on new members of staff.

Pupils told inspectors that they feel safe in school. They said that bullying is very rare and any that does occur is dealt with quickly and effectively. Pupils have a good knowledge about how to keep themselves safe from potential dangers because of effective teaching through the school's personal development programme.

Inspection findings

- You, ably supported by governors and directors, have established a clear vision for what education means at St Margaret Ward Catholic Academy. This vision places a premium on the personal development of pupils, based upon Catholic values. Staff, pupils and parents all share this vision and it is evident in all that the school does.
- The school building is richly decorated with pupils' high-quality art work. Together with regular reminders to 'remember that we are in the presence of God', the building is an environment that exudes the school's reflective and spiritual ethos.
- Leaders' evaluation of the school's strengths and weaknesses is accurate. Plans to address the areas that need to improve further, including outcomes in some subjects and in the sixth form, are clear, concise and well focused. Leaders are ambitious to see the school improve further.
- Middle leaders are enthusiastic, creative and autonomous. Because of support from senior leaders, they are able to articulate the part that they play in improving their areas of the school. For example, strong leadership of mathematics empowers teachers to innovate, and pupils make excellent progress as a result.
- The Newman Catholic Collegiate comprises St Margaret Ward Catholic Academy and eight primary schools. The school's governors sit on the 'academy committee', which is overseen by the collegiate's board of directors. Governors and directors bring expertise, commitment and a shared vision to the school. They know the school well, including its relative weaknesses, and they continually challenge leaders to improve. Their scrutiny is one key reason for the school's success.
- Membership of the collegiate also brings considerable benefit to the school through its close relationship with the eight primary school members. For example, a transition programme sees pupils in Year 6 spend two days per week in the school, for six weeks in the summer term. Pupils told inspectors that this time had helped them to settle quickly when they started Year 7.
- Teachers have strong subject knowledge, plan lessons carefully and give pupils thoughtful feedback that helps them improve their work. Many pupils told inspectors that their teachers are very supportive and will always give them extra help when they need it.
- Pupils behave well and work hard in lessons. They listen attentively to their teachers and to each other. Pupils are ambitious, keen to do well and are very proud of their school.
- Pupils also behave well around school between lessons, at break and lunchtime. They are considerate, polite and smart. The school is calm at these times, despite considerable congestion in some parts of the building.

- Attendance, historically well above national levels, has fallen a little this year. However, it remains above last year's national average for secondary schools. Pupils enjoy school and one commented 'I can't wait to get back to school after the holidays'.
- Leaders' explicit promotion of pupils' personal development or 'Attitudes for Life' is a particular strength of the school. Members of staff consistently model the positive attitudes that they teach through a programme of Every Child Matters (ECM) days. As a result, pupils develop into reflective and mature young people who are caring and considerate towards others.
- A number of pupils transfer to the school, having been unsuccessful in other schools. Staff work hard to welcome these new arrivals and help them to get back on track. Some of these pupils told inspectors that they valued the support that they have received after joining the school and appreciated that 'here has given me a fresh start'.
- Pupils join the school with attainment that is broadly average and finish Year 11 having achieved GCSE results that are consistently above national averages. There is some variation in achievement between different subjects. Achievement is high in some subjects, including mathematics, but lags behind in some other subjects, including science, French, history and geography.
- Pupils who have special educational needs or disability make particularly strong progress because they are given high-quality support, both in lessons and at other times. This helps them to catch up when they fall behind their peers and ensures that they achieve good outcomes.
- Disadvantaged pupils make better progress than others in many subjects because of the support that they receive. Consequently, gaps between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and other pupils in school and nationally have all but disappeared.
- Achievement in the sixth form has been a concern for several years. A steady trajectory of improvement was interrupted in 2014 when A level and AS level results dipped. Leaders took decisive action to ensure that students were taking appropriate courses and were given extra help when they fell behind. As a result, achievement improved a little in 2015 and the school's assessment data indicates that there will be further improvement this year.
- The school's focus on personal development is also apparent in the sixth form. Students undertake a wide variety of activities that complement their studies, including religious education, spoken English, helping in Year 7 to 11 lessons, relevant work experience and basic life skills, such as managing a bank account or wiring a plug. Students value their sixth form and especially the support that their teachers give them with their work and their applications for university or apprenticeships.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the excellent progress that pupils make in many GCSE subjects is matched in all subjects
- teaching in the sixth form guarantees that all students make consistently good progress.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the academy committee, the director of education for the archdiocese of Birmingham, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Stoke-on-Trent City Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Alun Williams
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we met with you and other senior and middle leaders, the vice-chair of the academy committee and two directors of the Newman Catholic Collegiate. We met with two groups of pupils drawn from Years 7 to 13 in order to find out their views about their education in the school. We joined you and other members of your senior leadership team in short visits to lessons, where we spoke to pupils and looked at their work. The views of parents were considered through the 45 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. Inspectors also evaluated several documents including improvement plans, information about pupils' progress, behaviour and attendance, and how the school keeps pupils safe.