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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mr Brendan Hickey
Headteacher
St Thomas More Catholic School Buxton
Palace Fields
Buxton
Derbyshire
SK17 6AF

Dear Mr Hickey

Short inspection of St Thomas More Catholic School Buxton

Following my visit to the school on 14 March 2017 with Stephen Long, 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 the school was judged to be good in May 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You have led the school well and continued to ensure that staff are true to the core values of the school. The staff and pupils are exceptionally loyal. In accordance with the school aims, they indeed have a 'strong sense of pride and belonging' for the school community. Teachers know individual pupils very well and provide them with good support academically and emotionally. Parents rightly praise the school. As one parent said, 'This school manages to provide an environment in which my daughter is safe, supported emotionally and challenged academically.'

The previous school inspection identified some weaknesses in teaching to support pupils of different abilities because teachers were not using pupils' prior attainment information effectively. In addition, the previous inspection noted that teaching did not provide sufficient challenge for the most able pupils. Teachers have access to, and use, a wide range of information about pupils' previous performance and needs. Teachers devise seating plans based on this information in order to maximise learning. You and the leadership team have successfully ensured that, since 2013, the most able achieve the high grades expected of them. The proportion of pupils achieving As and A*s across a range of subjects has consistently been higher than the national average. Teachers use their excellent subject knowledge well to challenge the most able pupils. Higher-attaining pupils spoken with during the inspection confirmed that work is matched well to their needs.

While pupils' progress and attainment at the end of Year 11 have been consistently above the national averages from 2013 to 2015, some groups of pupils made below-average progress in 2016. The progress made by disadvantaged and low-attaining pupils was below average in a range of subjects, particularly in mathematics and science. You have correctly identified the weaknesses in mathematics but not those in science as clearly. The work to improve these pupils' outcomes, especially in these two subjects, has already taken place and is starting to make a difference.

Subject leaders' action plans to tackle the slower progress made by disadvantaged and low-attaining pupils vary in quality and focus between subjects, however. For some subjects, the attainment and progress of disadvantaged pupils and low-attaining pupils do not have a high priority in their action plans. As a result, senior leaders and the governing body are not in a position to be able to hold subject leaders fully to account for the progress of these pupils.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and the leaders responsible for safeguarding have a sound understanding of the school's responsibilities to keep pupils safe. Staff have undertaken relevant training. The designated safeguarding leader (DSL) is aware of the local risks to pupils and she works well with local agencies and professionals to undertake preventative work with pupils. The staff and governors understand the risks associated with radicalisation, extremism and child sexual exploitation.

Referrals to the local authority are made in a timely manner, and leaders keep accurate and informative records about the support received by the pupils concerned and check them regularly. The DSL keeps staff up to date with the latest guidance about how to keep pupils safe and with the necessary information about pupils who are vulnerable or at risk.

Pupils are provided with a range of guidance to help them keep safe and help them understand the potential risks to safety they face. They are knowledgeable about how to keep safe online. They are confident that adults in the school will attend to their concerns or worries.

Bullying is treated very seriously in the school and not tolerated. Pupils, staff and parents agree that the school is a safe place. Pupils accept differences; there are very few incidents of prejudice-based behaviour.

Inspection findings

- You understand the school's strengths and weaknesses very well. The leadership team has provided good support to subject leaders to prepare them for the challenges of the new GCSE examination courses and the new assessment framework. The school's development plan identifies clear actions to tackle the priorities the school has identified. The success criteria by which these actions are to be measured are often vague, however. They lack the necessary

sharpness to ensure that governors can hold you and other leaders to account well enough.

- You have understood the importance of raising the profile of the needs of disadvantaged pupils in the school. Some of the actions taken so far are beginning to make a difference. For example, the attendance of some disadvantaged pupils is slowly improving as a result of more bespoke support for their families. While there have been successes such as this, the overall attendance of disadvantaged pupils still lags behind that of others, as does their progress.
- Leaders' plans to support disadvantaged pupils using pupil premium funding are detailed and wide-ranging. Leaders review the effectiveness of the work to support these pupils rigorously. All the disadvantaged pupils who studied alternative, work-related courses in key stage 4 last year went on to pursue meaningful post-16 studies and work. The differences in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and others are diminishing in the lower school.
- The subject leaders, especially those of the core subjects, have devised effective tracking systems to check on the progress of different groups of pupils. The science and mathematics departments, for example, identify underperforming groups and regularly implement support strategies for individual pupils. Often, these strategies are in the form of extra tuition. The attendance at these sessions is high.
- Subject leaders' effectiveness is strengthening. They invest time in their own professional development regularly. They engage with local networks of subject specialists and this has improved their curriculum knowledge and assessment skills. The new head of the mathematics department is starting to implement innovative strategies to improve the progress of low-attaining pupils.
- You have introduced a separate curriculum pathway in key stage 3 to support low-attaining pupils. The alternative pathway comprises a set of subjects which aim to boost pupils' confidence in basic skills. Early signs show that this strategy is proving successful. After a set period on the alternative pathway, the majority of pupils are ready to rejoin mainstream lessons and regain full access to the national curriculum.
- Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are supported well. The special educational needs coordinator knows the pupils' needs very well. She has used the school's management information systems well to inform teachers about pupils' needs. Teachers use this information to support their lesson planning. Teaching assistants are trained well and support targeted pupils effectively. The attendance of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is improving as a result of the careful support provided for pupils' social and emotional difficulties.
- Governors are very experienced. They are committed to the school and its ethos. The governing body monitors the work of leaders regularly and challenges you and other leaders. Governors have encouraged positive parental engagement with the school. The highly positive responses to the Ofsted online survey are testament to this.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they include sharper success criteria in the school's development plans to help the governing body hold leaders to account more effectively
- all subject leaders include a focus on disadvantaged and low-attaining pupils in departmental action plans to accelerate the progress and attendance of these groups of pupils.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner, the director of education for the Diocese of Nottingham and the director of children's services for Derbyshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Zarina Connolly
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors observed learning in 10 lessons, including one in the alternative pathway. Pupils' workbooks were examined during these lessons. Some observations were carried out jointly with a senior leader. Inspectors spoke with pupils in key stages 3 and 4. You, governors, senior leaders and subject leaders were interviewed. I scrutinised a range of school documentation, including the school's self-evaluation, the school and subject development plans, attendance and behaviour logs, school policies, information about pupils' attainment and progress, and safeguarding records. Inspectors took account of 89 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, 79 responses to the free text facility, 57 responses to a pupil survey and 32 responses to a staff survey.