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Mr Garret Fay
Headteacher
St Michael's Catholic School
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Dear Mr Fay

Short inspection of St Michael's Catholic School

Following my visit to the school on 11 January 2018 with Ofsted Inspectors Lea Hannam, Graham Marshall and Deborah Godfrey-Phaure, 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 October 2013.

Based on the evidence available during this short inspection, I have identified some priorities for improvement, which I advise the school to address. In light of these priorities, the school's next inspection will be a full section 5 inspection. **There is no change to the school's current overall effectiveness grade of good as a result of this inspection.**

You have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and you shared with inspectors how your team intends to improve pupils' outcomes and progress further. Since taking up post in June 2015, you have identified the need to develop a more cohesive community between the primary and secondary phases of St Michael's Catholic School. This has led to more collaborative work to develop specialist teaching across both phases. However, your school's self-evaluation and development plan does not currently reflect your accurate analysis of and vision for your school. This makes it difficult for governors to assess the impact of leaders' actions to improve the school. Governors ask challenging questions of school leaders, but know that some of their meetings need to be timelier, for example when funding is agreed to support disadvantaged pupils.

Christian values underpin the school's inclusive culture and ethos, in which all are treated with respect and dignity. Pupils are typically well behaved, respectful and friendly to one another. Staff and pupils are very proud of their school. Pupils take pride in their work. Their books are generally very well looked after and cared for. Staff know the pupils well, and have high expectations of their conduct.

Since the last inspection, primary teams have tried different ways of improving

pupils' writing. Many primary pupils' literacy and topic books, looked at by inspectors during the inspection, evidenced how this work is beginning to improve the quality of a range of their writing. However, some pupils are not yet making enough progress as a result of these changes. Equally, recent work to improve the mathematics curriculum is in its early stages.

The quality of teaching in some secondary subjects has not been as strong as it should have been in recent years. Leaders' work to improve teaching has been hampered by some changes in staff. Sometimes, teaching does not meet different groups of learners' needs effectively enough and teachers' feedback to pupils about their work is inconsistent. Parents expressed mixed views about how well staff were communicating with them.

Changes to the leadership and staffing in the sixth form affected the sixth form offer and student outcomes in 2017. You and your team have now filled most of the leadership vacancies and many of these new leaders are in the process of implementing positive changes. However, systems to track and monitor students' progress in the last year have not been robust enough. Leaders recognise there is a lot to do to increase the number of students in the sixth form and sufficiently develop teaching, learning and assessment so that students achieve well.

In 2017, pupils with low and middle prior attainment made stronger progress than the most able. Disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities have not made the same rates of progress as their peers. You have correctly identified that these pupils need to achieve better outcomes and that teachers need to improve how they stretch and challenge the most able. Consequently, these groups are whole-school priorities for 2017/18.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and that records are detailed and of high quality. Governors routinely check that all processes and policies meet requirements and that school records are thorough and complete.

Specifically trained safeguarding staff ensure that there is a strong culture of safeguarding across the school. Staff receive useful safeguarding training periodically throughout the year to keep up to date.

Pupils are taught how to stay safe and they feel safe at school. The vast majority of parents agree that their children are well cared for and safe. However, a notable minority of pupils and parents expressed concerns about instances of bullying and how well they are dealt with by staff.

Pupils told inspectors they are confident about whom to go to if they have a concern. The school's work in educating pupils about the risks of drugs, alcohol and child exploitation, recognising radicalisation and e-safety takes a high priority throughout the academic year.

Inspection findings

- During this inspection, we looked closely at specific aspects of the school's provision, including: the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements; early years provision; the primary provision for writing and mathematics; the progress of disadvantaged pupils; and the quality of provision in the sixth form.
- The early years curriculum and the way it is organised stimulates children's learning effectively. Many children join the nursery with low oracy and literacy skills in English, as many speak English as an additional language. The support and guidance that staff provide for pupils ensure that most children develop their phonics skills, reading and number work very well.
- Leaders' continual focus on writing in the primary phase and the school's new approach to combining reading and writing are beginning to have a positive impact on the quality of primary pupils' writing. You recognise that this new approach to developing writing needs time to embed across the primary phase. Not all pupils make enough progress yet, including those who speak English as an additional language.
- The primary mathematics coordinator has identified that changes need to be made to teaching and learning across key stages 1 and 2 to include more problem-solving and reasoning opportunities for pupils. Currently, some pupils, including those with low prior attainment and the most able, are not learning how to develop their problem-solving and reasoning skills sufficiently well. This is because some activities are not suitably resourced for those with low prior attainment, or lack sufficient challenge to extend the most able.
- You have correctly identified that the attendance of disadvantaged pupils needed to improve and this area has been a school focus for a while. Staff have built strong relationships with families to improve attendance and reduce persistent absenteeism. This is having a positive effect for some vulnerable pupils and, subsequently, their attendance has improved significantly overall. However, you recognise that there is still work to be done to improve the attendance of some of these pupils.
- You know that disadvantaged pupils make more rapid progress in GCSE English and mathematics than in other GCSE subjects. Leaders responsible for disadvantaged pupils recognise that more needs to be done, from Year 1 onwards, to identify quickly which strategies are accelerating pupils' progress most effectively. Governors do not review what impact additional funding is having on these pupils sharply enough.
- Your sixth-form team has suffered from some turbulence in staffing. As a result, students' outcomes were not as strong in 2017 as they were in 2016. You know the importance of securing high-quality A-level teachers and recognise that actions need to be taken to track and monitor the progress that students make across their subjects more effectively than in the past. Students appreciate the support that they receive. However, more remains to be done to improve the progress that A-level students make from their starting points at the end of Year 11.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- staff provide further effective support and guidance for pupils who need it, and challenge pupils consistently well, particularly the most able
- provision and support for disadvantaged pupils is planned and evaluated more carefully, so that these pupils make stronger progress overall
- effective provision, planning and monitoring across the sixth form challenges and supports students to meet their subject targets more consistently
- the primary mathematics curriculum incorporates greater opportunities for pupils to develop their problem-solving and reasoning skills across key stages 1 and 2
- the new primary writing curriculum leads to further and sustained improvement in pupils' progress.

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

Yours sincerely

Caroline Walshe
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors met with you, your leadership team, the chair, vice-chair and other representatives of the governing body. The inspection team met with pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities, both formally and informally, to discuss their views about their learning. Inspectors met with your school improvement partners. Inspectors visited lessons, in a range of subjects and year groups, with you and members of the leadership team. Inspectors looked at the school's documentation, including your evaluation of the school's effectiveness and school development plan, progress and attendance information relating to current pupils, and governors' minutes. Inspectors checked the school's policies relating to safeguarding, the use of additional funding, including pupil premium funding, and the curriculum. Inspectors considered 100 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, 48 responses to the staff questionnaire and 100 responses from pupils and students.