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Mr Nigel Fisher
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Dear Mr Fisher

Short inspection of St Columba's Catholic Boys' School

Following my visit to the school on 23 January 2019 with Jo Jones, 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 September 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

You and your governors aim to provide a highly inclusive education in which every pupil is 'supported and challenged to achieve his best'. The Catholic values you hold are evident in the safe and welcoming community the school has become. An example of this was an inspiring and interactive assembly, which we saw, about the need to combat prejudice. When speaking to us, pupils expressed strong appreciation of the support you and your staff provide.

Warm and positive relationships are a strong feature of your school. As a result, pupils feel confident in lessons to ask questions and push themselves forward in their learning. You have continued to maintain high standards of behaviour since the last inspection. Absence from school and your use of fixed-term exclusions are both lower than the national average.

The last inspection identified the use of assessment information to set challenging targets for pupils as a key area for improvement. Most pupils, when asked by us, were able to identify their targets and knew what they needed to do next to achieve them. In science, assessment is used effectively to consolidate learning and build confidence. Consequently, pupils show considerable pride in their work. However, the quality of assessment is not consistent across the school. In English, for example, pupils' understanding of how to go about a task has not been properly assessed, and teachers' advice on how to improve is not always helpful.

The school has strong support from staff, parents and carers. A high number of parents responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, and they are extremely positive about the school. Virtually all respondents would recommend St Columba's Catholic Boys' School to other parents. When surveyed, all staff said that the school is well led and managed.

You and your leadership team are well supported by an effective team of governors. Committed to your vision, they have a detailed knowledge of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Records of their meetings show that they regularly ask challenging questions about how well the school is doing.

Safeguarding is effective.

Nearly all pupils who spoke to inspectors said that they feel safe and well looked after. When surveyed, their parents agreed. Leaders have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed. The single central record of staff recruitment checks is comprehensive and up to date.

All staff are trained to an appropriate level and receive regular safeguarding updates. Pupils causing concern are carefully monitored, and appropriate referrals are made. There is evidence of effective partnership working with a range of agencies. Your curriculum covers key safeguarding issues with pupils, including e-safety, and is carefully matched to the needs of pupils of different ages. Pupils told inspectors that rare instances of bullying are dealt with promptly and effectively.

Inspection findings

- We looked first to see how well your strategies to improve the progress and attainment of most-able pupils were working. While progress of this group is strong in science and languages, it is weaker in other subjects, notably English. There was strong evidence that training activities organised by your leaders are having an impact on pupils' progress in most subjects. However, there is still inconsistency.
- In visits to lessons, inspectors saw questioning being used to challenge the most able and develop their thinking skills. Teachers have strong subject knowledge, which is being used to inspire pupils. There is evidence that feedback is used effectively to deepen pupils' learning. Pupils reported that there are helpful resources available for independent learning. As a result, the work of the most able shows improving progress in most subjects. However, in subjects which rely heavily on the written word, such as English and the humanities, the most able often lack some of the skills to express opinions effectively in writing. Focusing on extended writing skills should be a priority for the school.
- We next investigated how you and your leaders tackle weaker pupil outcomes in English. There was a slight improvement in results last year, and progress in English is in line with the national average. It is significantly weak for the most able. We noted that you had stabilised staffing in the department. As a result, behaviour for learning is positive. In lessons, pupils demonstrate appropriate knowledge of the books they are studying, but their work shows that they are not

in the habit of backing up their opinions by referring to the text.

- Inspectors observed that inaccuracies and misconceptions are not systematically picked up. As a result, work in books is sometimes unfinished. Pupils' books show that progress in writing is not sufficiently rapid to support pupils in reaching their ambitious targets. Vocabulary development is not strong enough to enable pupils to reach the very highest levels. You and your leaders are tackling this through a whole-school 'reading for pleasure' programme. However, its impact is not yet apparent.
- GCSE English literature results are stronger than those in English language. This is because pupils take English language GCSE in Year 10. This policy should be reviewed.
- Finally, we looked at how effective your curriculum was in meeting the needs and aspirations of pupils, and preparing them for next steps. A visit to the resource unit for pupils with autism spectrum disorder showed that provision for them is very effective. Careful curriculum planning is in place to cater for rising numbers of pupils with complex needs. Consequently, all pupils from this unit last year went on to undertake study at a local college.
- Only 19% of pupils entered all the English Baccalaureate subjects in 2018. As a result of the recent increased take-up of French, 39% of Year 10 pupils are now on course to take examinations in these subjects. This is in line with national figures and indicates that the most able follow an appropriate academic pathway. Ninety-seven per cent of pupils went on to study in the local Catholic sixth-form college, or other sixth forms. The rest entered apprenticeships.
- The curriculum in the lower school enables pupils to study a wide range of subjects. Drama has recently been added. Since September, a stronger programme of careers education has been put in place. Governors and external partners have given very positive feedback about its impact. For a comparatively small school, a wide range of optional subjects is available to older pupils in key stage 4. The curriculum offer at your school is a significant strength.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- leaders develop a cohesive school approach to improve the extended writing skills of pupils
- the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in English is improved so that pupils make stronger progress
- the policy for taking GCSE English language in Year 10 is reviewed.

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

Yours sincerely

James Whiting
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

We visited 13 lessons and an assembly, with leaders. In lessons, we scrutinised pupils' work and spoke to pupils and staff. We met with a range of leaders, governors, a representative of the local authority and groups of pupils. We observed the school in action at break and lunchtime. We scrutinised a range of documentation, as well as staff and parent surveys.