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Ms Caroline Vile
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Vile

Special measures monitoring inspection of Ellesmere Port Catholic High School

Following my visit with Phil Wood, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 3 and 4 July 2019, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the school's recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in March 2019.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school's action plan is fit for purpose.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection across all subjects and departments.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of schools for the Diocese of Shrewsbury, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Cheshire West and Chester. This letter will be published on

the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jonathan Smart
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in March 2019

- Improve leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - governors hold leaders to account more diligently for their actions
 - senior leaders and governors develop a more accurate view of the quality of education that pupils receive
 - middle leaders and teachers receive the support and challenge that they need to bring about consistent and sustained improvement to teaching and pupils' achievement
 - leaders become more discerning in their use of the pupil premium funding so that it has a greater impact on improving the achievement and attendance of disadvantaged pupils
 - leaders support staff to manage pupils' behaviour more effectively.
- Improve teaching, learning and assessment so that pupils, particularly the most able, boys and those pupils who are disadvantaged, make stronger progress across the curriculum by ensuring that all teachers:
 - have consistently high expectations of what pupils can achieve
 - apply the school's literacy policy and support pupils to develop the technical accuracy of their writing
 - assess accurately what pupils can and cannot do and use this information to plan work that challenges pupils and enables them to deepen their learning.
- Urgently improve pupils' progress and attainment in mathematics by ensuring that:
 - leaders develop a clearer understanding of the issues that are preventing pupils from attaining well
 - teachers are supported effectively to improve their practice.
- Improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare, by:
 - reducing further pupils' rates of absence and persistent absence, particularly among disadvantaged pupils
 - supporting pupils to develop the habits of effective learners
 - providing more planned opportunities for pupils to learn about issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Improve the 16 to 19 study programmes by ensuring that:
 - teaching enables students to make significantly better progress across the curriculum, especially in mathematics and English literature

- the principles of the DfE's 16 to 19 study programmes are met by providing students with opportunities to undertake work experience or work-related training that links to their needs and plans.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium funding should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 3 and 4 July 2019

Evidence

During the inspection, inspectors held meetings with the headteacher, senior leaders, middle leaders, teachers, teaching assistants, local clergy, the school chaplain, members of the governing body, the director of schools for the Diocese of Shrewsbury, the director of the teaching school from Loreto Grammar School, the local authority 14 to 19 adviser, the local authority school intervention coordinator and the external pupil premium reviewer. Telephone conversations were held with the associate school improvement adviser, the chair of the Cheshire West and Chester headteachers association and a national leader of governance (NLG). In addition, inspectors held formal and informal discussions with a wide range of pupils from across key stages 3, 4 and 5.

As part of the inspection, inspectors observed pupils' behaviour during lessons and moving to and from lessons. Additionally, inspectors observed teaching and learning jointly with senior leaders and the local authority school intervention coordinator across a wide range of subjects and across all three key stages. Alongside senior and middle leaders, inspectors undertook a detailed scrutiny of pupils' work across all key stages. Added to this, they examined a wide range of documentation. This included the school improvement plan, peer review documentation, attendance information, behaviour records and documentation relating to teaching, learning and assessment.

Context

Prior to the last inspection, the headteacher and governing body had already begun to restructure the senior leadership team. Since then this process has continued apace. A full review of roles and responsibilities has been undertaken and additional leadership capacity has been secured. Two additional senior assistant headteachers, one additional assistant headteacher and one associate assistant headteacher have been appointed. The current deputy headteacher has decided to retire. As governors have not yet found a suitable replacement, an experienced deputy headteacher has been seconded from the Loreto Teaching School Alliance to work alongside the headteacher and her leadership team.

In addition to new posts at senior leadership level, there have been changes to middle leadership. An additional special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) has been appointed. Following the last inspection, a new head of English and a second in department in English have been appointed. Added to this, a new head of information and communication technology (ICT) has been appointed and a new second in department in ICT has joined the school.

Due to a significant increase in pupil numbers from September 2019, leaders and governors have also appointed an additional teacher in mathematics, English,

religious education, physical education, ICT, and business studies. Further appointments have been made in art and in history.

To the wider school, a new business manager and two new learning mentors have also been appointed, in addition to an education welfare officer to support improvements to pupils' rates of attendance. Most importantly, the school has a full complement of staff from September 2019.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Although the judgment of special measures came as a shock to the entire school community of Ellesmere Port Catholic High School, you, your leadership team, your staff and most governors now understand and accept the reasons for the judgement. This is because, although you have secured some improvements to mathematics, standards remain well below where they should be. You accept that students' progress in some subjects in the sixth form is very weak. Furthermore, you and your team also recognise that the progress made by boys, disadvantaged pupils and higher-ability pupils requires substantial improvement. That said, you and your leadership team have embraced the challenge to improve the school at the pace required. There is an atmosphere of positivity and, in the main, staff morale remains high.

Since the previous inspection, you have wasted no time in producing a detailed, high-quality action plan to respond to the key challenges facing the school. This action plan is fit for purpose. It addresses all of the key areas for improvement contained within the last report. The action plan contains a wealth of information to support your newly formed leadership team so that they can fulfil their roles effectively. You have made it clear which 'project' team is responsible for which key area of improvement. Timelines are in place and measurable milestones are contained within most areas of the plan. That said, during the inspection we discussed the benefits of prioritising the key actions into the order of importance. This is so that the plan does not become too unwieldy. You also recognised the benefit of adding key questions to the plan that governors might use to hold leaders to account for the impact of their actions.

In relation to the effectiveness of governance arrangements, the local authority (LA) does not currently intend to use its powers to replace the governing body with an interim executive board (IEB). This is because the LA is continually reviewing the impact that the governing body is having on school improvement. Since the previous inspection, it is clear that governors have taken effective action alongside you and your leadership team to replace staff, expand the senior leadership team, broker external support and begin the implementation of the post-Ofsted action plan.

In response to the previous inspection report, you have commissioned an external review of governance, which is well underway. During the visit, I spoke with the

NLG who is undertaking this review. She is providing a raft of training and support that will continue into the new academic year. She is certain that, with some changes to the composition of the governing body, governors have the necessary skills to fulfil their roles effectively. In addition, the NLG is reviewing the committee procedures and ensuring that governors are holding leaders fully to account for their work. The LA has confirmed that if it has any concerns it will immediately exercise its statutory powers to replace the governing body with an IEB.

In addition to the review of governance, you have acted quickly on the recommendations of the last inspection report to commission a review of the use of pupil premium funding. In the same way that the NLG will work with governors into the autumn term, you have ensured that the external reviewer of the pupil premium will provide ongoing, effective support to the assistant headteacher with responsibility for disadvantaged pupils. You have also ensured that the pupil premium lead now has sufficient time to fulfil this role effectively.

Discussions with the assistant headteacher and pupil premium reviewer during the inspection showed a secure understanding of what needs to be done to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. For example, he has already secured improvements to the rates of attendance of disadvantaged pupils so that they are in school and ready to learn. He is using breakfast briefings to share best practice with staff and to raise awareness of effective strategies to improve the attainment and progress of disadvantaged pupils.

The pupil premium lead is clearly thinking deeply about how to match the strong pastoral support that pupils currently receive with an equally strong focus on academic rigour in every classroom. He has appropriate plans in place to monitor the impact of teaching on disadvantaged pupils' learning and progress. During the inspection, the pupil premium lead was also clear about his intention to ensure that teachers assess pupils' prior knowledge about key topics and concepts before beginning to teach them. He clearly articulated plans to show how high-quality monitoring of disadvantaged pupils' learning and progress would inform teachers' ongoing training and development in the future.

In addition to the pupil premium lead, you are asking other leaders to review how the findings from the school's quality assurance processes can inform the staff training programme. This is because although staff are afforded a wide range of training experiences, they do not always apply what they have learned in their classrooms. You are also reflecting on the type of monitoring activities that you undertake to ensure that the information generated is accurate and that it promotes the best possible improvements to teaching and learning.

With this in mind, you have brokered a whole range of support from local specialist leaders in education (SLE) to assist with raising standards across the school. There is, however, some way to go before you can empower some middle leaders to take full ownership of the monitoring of teaching and learning in their subject areas. This

is because some middle leaders are currently focusing on the basics, for example ensuring that staff plan lessons effectively and that policies are applied consistently.

One such policy that middle leaders are supporting is the behaviour policy. During the inspection, several groups of staff and pupils raised concerns with inspectors about low-level disruption in lessons and some older pupils' behaviour at social times. Overall, staff feel well supported by you and your senior leaders. Most staff know and recognise that you have worked hard to create a positive climate for learning across the school by continually reviewing the behaviour policy. However, not all staff apply this policy equally well. Some staff do not take responsibility for promoting high-quality behaviour for learning in every lesson. They do not take enough time to understand pupils' starting points and their individual barriers to learning and plan lessons that enthuse, excite and engage pupils. However, where staff do this routinely low-level disruption is minimised.

Without doubt you know what needs to be done to improve the school. Your colleagues across the local area, including at the LA and diocese, hold you in high regard. They confirm inspectors' views that you are outward facing, resilient and determined to ensure that the pupils at Ellesmere Catholic High School get the best possible education. With your restructured senior leadership team, your new middle leaders and classroom teachers, you are now well placed to promote substantial and sustained improvements for pupils.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Since the previous inspection, you have increased leadership capacity to improve the overall quality of teaching, learning and assessment. For example, you have appointed additional leaders to focus on developing pupils' oracy and subject-specific literacy skills across the curriculum. You have also begun to develop a comprehensive programme to support a culture of reading across the school. In the new academic year, you have commissioned a peer review of reading and literacy since you and your leaders know that these are key components in unlocking pupils' potential. However, you recognise that some teachers do not fully implement the school's literacy policy. You are taking effective steps to increase the support that teachers get in this area.

Alongside the development of pupils' literacy skills, you are acting to improve the accuracy of pupils' writing. This is particularly necessary with boys. A lack of depth in pupils' written work is a barrier to their progress. Added to this, during the inspection, it became clear that pupils do not have an effective and comprehensive set of notes from which they can revise. For example, if pupils are working at about a grade 4 in English, they do not know what a top-grade answer looks like. Consequently, pupils are revising from an incomplete set of notes, so hindering their achievement.

Without doubt you recognise that teachers' expectations of what pupils can and

should achieve are not consistently high across the curriculum. This limits pupils' learning and progress in some subject areas. You have taken effective action to replace teachers who cannot meet pupils' needs and you have a strong, relentless focus on improving standards.

Inspection evidence shows that teachers and middle leaders are increasingly aware of how to plan more effectively for pupils' learning and progress. They are more successful in using their formal and informal assessments of where pupils are in their learning to plan the next steps of development. However, there remains an issue with knowledge retention in some subjects, for example in GCSE and A-level mathematics and A-level media studies. Some teachers do not use their assessments of pupils' prior knowledge to plan lessons that promote strong outcomes. This is particularly the case for boys, disadvantaged pupils and the most able pupils. You and your leadership team are acutely aware of where those issues lie.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Since the previous inspection, you have wasted no time in working to ensure that pupils become increasingly effective learners. For example, there is a strong focus on developing pupils' resilience for learning. Furthermore, you have commissioned an external consultant to formulate an action plan that focuses on developing resilience in every pupil. You have also developed the 'reflection room'. This facility is having a positive effect on pupils' behaviour and resilience. It demonstrates your absolute commitment to providing an inclusive approach to behaviour management which supports pupils' wider development.

Increasingly, pupils are also demonstrating their commitment to learning by redrafting their work. This enables them to act on the teacher's feedback to improve their work and builds their confidence in their own abilities. However, this is not seen consistently across the school.

In addition to ensuring that pupils take increasing responsibility for the quality of their work, you are supporting teachers to raise their aspirations of what pupils can and should achieve. For example, in modern foreign languages and history pupils show that they are effective learners through the quality of work that they routinely produce. Conversely, however, in science some pupils do not take pride and care in their work by using a pencil to draw tables and graphs. Their work lacks precision. Across the school, some boys continue to find it difficult to organise their work and they do not take enough pride in their workbooks.

Another key area of focus continues to be pupils' rates of attendance at school. The impact of the recently appointed education welfare officer can already be seen. While in 2019 pupils' overall rate of attendance remains below the national average, and the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school is higher than the national average, there have been some improvements. Most notably, the

proportion of disadvantaged pupils who are regularly absent from school has improved from 33% to 28%. While this is still extremely high, you and your team are taking effective action to ensure that these pupils know the importance of being in school in order to learn.

Following the previous inspection, you have effectively reviewed the opportunities that pupils have to learn about issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity. While you commit to providing an inclusive school where everyone is valued, you recognise that this aspect of your work can be strengthened. Consequently, you are chairing a group in partnership with the Loreto Teaching School Alliance and the Diocese of Shrewsbury to improve this important aspect of pupils' wider learning and development.

Outcomes for pupils

Over the last few years outcomes in mathematics have been a key concern for leaders because pupils' progress has been inadequate. In 2018, not only was pupils' progress in mathematics extremely weak, once again, but the proportion of pupils attaining a standard or good pass dropped further. This is because of historical weak leadership, significant turbulence in staffing and disjointed, poor-quality teaching. As a result, pupils said that they did not enjoy the subject and were disengaged, and behaviour was poor.

You have taken effective action to stabilise the staffing in mathematics and you have appointed an additional teacher to reduce class sizes. The recently appointed head of department has worked effectively to galvanise the team and restore pupils' confidence in teaching and learning. She has ensured that the newly formed department plans its lessons together, discusses how to teach mathematical concepts and topics and works collaboratively. Teachers are now well supported to develop and improve their practice. Consequently, pupils can now see significant improvements both to the quality of teaching and behaviour in this curriculum area.

However, while this much-needed action is welcomed, you still have concerns about pupils' learning and progress in this subject and inspectors agree with you. During the monitoring visit it became clear that pupils, particularly in key stage 4, do not have a strong enough grasp of basic mathematical concepts. This is because the gaps in their knowledge are too vast. Although your teachers are providing additional support sessions, there is simply too much ground to make up. Inspectors are of the opinion that although your internal tracking information shows some improvement to pupil outcomes in mathematics, GCSE results are likely to be weak once again in 2019.

At key stage 3, inspectors found that pupils' books showed much stronger progress in mathematics. However, when pupils were asked about their learning and progress, some could not recall how to complete mathematical processes. They appear to have copied answers from the board but had not committed the concepts

to memory. They lacked mathematical fluency. You share these concerns and you continue to work with the department to improve standards for pupils.

It is clear that you have a complex cohort of pupils. For example, over the past five years you have admitted 142 pupils who have struggled to settle in other schools. You also have some concerns about a number of pupils whose prior attainment on entry indicates higher ability than their knowledge and skills demonstrate. While this situation clearly has some impact on outcomes for pupils, you are adamant that your teachers will remove the barriers facing these pupils so that they can excel. You recognise that this is a journey that requires teachers to raise further their aspirations for what pupils can and should achieve. You also recognise that it is predominantly boys, disadvantaged boys and higher-ability boys who continue to underachieve. During the inspection, we discussed the value of a detailed and rigorous review of the provision for boys.

In relation to outcomes for other groups of pupils, including the most able, there are signs of improvement. For example, a review of disadvantaged pupils' books showed that they are making much stronger progress at key stage 3, although this still varies between subjects. You are acutely aware of where that variability lies and you are acting with your leadership team to address this issue. Although your own internal assessment information shows that the progress of disadvantaged pupils in Year 11 in 2019 is improving, it remains too low, particularly in English and in mathematics.

16 to 19 study programmes

Since the previous inspection, the provision in the sixth form has improved quickly. You have ensured that the principles of the 16 to 19 study programmes, which require students to undertake high-quality work experience and/or work-related learning, are met. All Year 12 students are undertaking a work placement in July 2019. You and your sixth-form team have also worked with the local authority's 14 to 19 adviser to review work-related learning opportunities. You have made significant and substantial progress in this area.

More recently, you have also reviewed the curriculum at key stage 5. While some subjects continue to perform well, for example English language, chemistry, history and psychology, other subjects are weak. These include English literature, mathematics and media studies. You have reviewed what will be taught from September 2019 and removed some subjects from the timetable. You are also expanding the provision to offer some new applied general A levels.

Although this action has been taken and is commendable, inspection evidence shows that outcomes are unlikely to improve for this year's Year 13 cohort. This is due to the legacy of poor-quality teaching and weak leadership in some curriculum areas, including English literature, media studies and mathematics. This issue, however, has been addressed for September 2019. The mathematics department,

for example, has a full complement of subject specialists and stable staffing from which to improve the quality of teaching and outcomes for pupils and students.

External support

Leaders and governors have access to a wide range of effective and appropriate support to help to secure rapid, sustained improvements to the school. For example, the Loreto Teaching School Alliance is providing ongoing coaching and mentoring for senior leaders. It is also making SLEs available to support improvements to the English, mathematics and science departments. The Cheshire Vale Teaching School Alliance is providing support for the SENCOs, access to subject network meetings and support with post-16 provision.

As part of the support offered by the Shrewsbury Diocese, peer reviews continue to be commissioned. The headteacher is to request additional peer reviews around the specific areas that caused the school to be subject to special measures, for example a review of the progress that boys make across the curriculum. The LA is providing appropriate additional specialist support through its associate school improvement adviser. The headteacher is required to attend half-termly review meetings with the director of education. A bid has also been submitted to the Strategic School Improvement Emergency Fund, with the aim of securing further SLEs to support school improvement.