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9 March 2020

Mrs Caroline Vile
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Dear Mrs Vile

Special measures monitoring inspection of Ellesmere Port Catholic High School

Following my visit to your school on 27 February 2020, 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in March 2019. The full list of the areas for improvement that were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

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

Leaders and managers are not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

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 second monitoring inspection on 27 February 2020

Evidence

During the inspection, the inspector held meetings with the headteacher and her senior leadership team. Meetings were also held with a range of subject leaders, members of the governing body, the director of schools from the Diocese of Shrewsbury and pupils from across key stages 3, 4 and 5.

The inspector met with a leadership and development coach who is working with senior and middle leaders across the school. Telephone calls were made to a representative of the local authority, the school improvement partner and the director of the teaching school from Loreto Grammar School.

As part of the inspection, the inspector visited a sample of lessons in English and mathematics across key stages 3, 4 and 5 with subject leaders. During the lesson visits, the inspector sampled pupils' work. The inspector also observed pupils' behaviour around the site and in the lessons visited.

The inspector checked on how well leaders are building an effective curriculum for pupils. In addition, the inspector checked on the school's progress towards becoming an academy.

The inspector reviewed a range of documentation, including the school's own evaluation of its effectiveness.

Context

Since the previous monitoring visit, the headteacher has reviewed the roles and responsibilities of her senior leadership team. She has continued to build capacity at senior level. For example, since September 2019, three new assistant headteachers and two new senior assistant headteachers have been appointed. A deputy headteacher has been seconded from another school to work with the leadership team for two days per week. An additional special educational needs coordinator has been appointed to the senior leadership team. A new business manager and a new data manager have also been appointed.

There has been a full restructure of roles and responsibilities across the school's pastoral team. For example, leaders have introduced a well-being lead, a careers and safety lead, as well as a relationships and sex education lead. From Easter 2020, there will be three additional non-teaching pastoral leaders at middle leadership level. This is to increase the school's capacity to support pupils' wider development.

The headteacher has recruited additional teachers to the science department from May 2020.

The progress made by the school in tackling the key areas for improvement identified at the section 5 inspection

Since the previous monitoring visit, leaders have worked hard to improve pupils' learning and achievement in mathematics. Senior leaders and governors have continued to provide the right level of support and training for the subject leader of mathematics and her recently formed department. The subject leader is passionate and committed to improving outcomes for pupils.

To do this, the subject leader has worked hard to improve the curriculum. She is extremely aware of the need to bridge the wide gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding. This is because of the previous poor-quality curriculum offer. The subject leader is thinking deeply about how she plans the curriculum to build pupils' confidence and aptitudes in the subject. She is equally thinking about how to ensure that pupils know and remember more in mathematics over time.

Leaders' efforts to secure improvements to pupils' outcomes in mathematics are beginning to bear fruit. In 2019, the proportion of pupils who attained a standard pass in GCSE mathematics increased to 59%. This was an improvement of 18 percentage points on the previous year. The number of pupils who achieved a strong pass went up to 29%. While this represents a secure improvement in attainment, it is still below the national average in both measures. Pupils' progress between key stages 2 and 4 in mathematics also continues to be in the bottom 20% of schools nationally. This is because not enough pupils achieve the higher grades.

In the sixth form, the quality of the mathematics curriculum has also improved. The subject leader is convinced that staff with the right subject knowledge are now in place to deliver the A-level mathematics courses. Students told the inspector that they had noticed improvements in the quality of their curriculum post 16. The progress that students made on A-level mathematics courses in 2019 improved considerably and was strong.

Leaders must be commended for these improvements to mathematics. However, this inspection identified additional areas of concern with curriculum planning in key stage 3. While the curriculum is improving in mathematics, the inspector found that the key stage 3 curriculum lacks depth and ambition in many other subjects. For example, in Year 7 English, pupils read a text that many have already studied in primary school. Across key stage 3 in English, pupils only study extracts of Shakespeare plays rather than reading two full plays as required by the national curriculum.

The new subject leader of English fully recognises this and is working to overhaul what is taught right across the curriculum, including in key stages 4 and 5. She too is receiving external support to improve curriculum planning in this subject. However, the curriculum provision in English remains weak, and the choice of text and materials do not fully support pupils' literacy development. That said, what is very pleasing to note is that leaders have ceased entering pupils for GCSE English

literature in Year 10. This is because, as shown by external outcomes over time, pupils are not ready to reach their potential in this subject partway through their GCSE course.

In other subjects, for example art and design, music, drama, modern foreign languages and history, the content of the key stage 3 curriculum is too narrow. It does not fully embrace the spirit of the national curriculum. Unless pupils opt for these subjects at GCSE, they stop learning about them without having a full and rich experience of what they have to offer. The curriculum plans in these subjects are often condensed. In addition, leaders do not identify with sufficient precision the knowledge that they want pupils to learn and the order in which they should learn that knowledge. What leaders expect pupils to learn in key stage 3 lacks breadth and depth. This disadvantages pupils.

Leaders and governors believe that their curriculum design meets pupils' learning needs. However, this is not borne out in pupils' outcomes over time. Although improving slowly, pupils still underachieve in many subjects. Furthermore, the progress made by disadvantaged pupils between key stages 2 and 4 declined in 2019. Pupils are not as ready as they should be for the next stages of their education, employment or training. The curriculum rationale and design do not support teachers to be as ambitious as they should be for pupils. This is because the knowledge that they plan to teach lacks depth.

Leaders recognise that these curriculum decisions are hindering the journey towards the removal of special measures under the new education inspection framework. This has disappointed them. However, it must be said that leaders remain open, buoyant and committed to improving the school. It was very pleasing to see that governors had also evaluated the curriculum. For example, they said that the curriculum in geography does not currently meet the requirements of the national curriculum. They also raised concerns about the curriculum offer in technology.

The headteacher, alongside her team, has made significant inroads into the other areas of improvement left at the previous inspection. For example, leaders have successfully improved pupils' behaviour. The pupils from key stages 3 and 4 with whom the inspector spoke said that pupils' behaviour has improved significantly. This is reflected in the school's behavioural records, where the number of pupils removed from lessons is reducing quickly. Teachers are now much more consistent in applying the behaviour policy. The leadership of behaviour is strong, and pupils are being increasingly well prepared to be effective learners.

Attendance has also improved due to the implementation of a wide range of effective strategies. Pupils' overall attendance for 2019/20 is now tracking increasingly close to the 2018/19 national average. Leaders should be commended for this. While still higher than the national average, the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school is decreasing year-on-year. Most notably, the proportion of disadvantaged boys who are regularly absent from school has

decreased by three percentage points since 2017/18. That said, far too many disadvantaged pupils remain regularly absent from school.

Leaders have been equally successful in reviewing and evaluating how they support pupils' personal development. Within the leadership structure, there is now a senior assistant headteacher and assistant headteacher responsible for pupils' personal development. The pastoral team has been restructured and the school is committed to providing pupils with high-quality relationships and sex education, which incorporates key themes such as sexual orientation and gender identity. The pupils with whom the inspector spoke are pleased with these developments.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

While the outcome of this monitoring visit was very disappointing for leaders, they recognise that there remains significant work to do to improve the school. Leaders are outward-facing and they are open to a wide range of support. They embrace each challenge with resilience and a 'can do' approach. The leadership team has been strengthened and the seconded deputy is supporting the headteacher well. Leaders recognise that their major concern now is the quality of the school's curriculum.

Since the previous monitoring visit, senior leaders have invested heavily in improving the effectiveness of middle leaders. External support has been sourced for subject leaders in English, mathematics and science. There is, however, much more work to do to ensure that all middle leaders plan and implement an effective curriculum, particularly at key stages 3 and 4, right across the school.

Since the previous monitoring visit, the quality of governance has also improved. An external review of governance has now been completed. Governors have been challenged to improve their work and they have acted on the key recommendations. Governors are knowledgeable about the school and they regularly reflect on their effectiveness. They recognise that they too are on a journey of improvement. Their openness and transparency places them in a good position to hold leaders ever more to account. Governors accept that the curriculum is not good enough.

Soon after the last section 5 inspection, the school received a directive academy order because it was judged to be inadequate. The appropriate authorities are not moving the school towards becoming an academy at the pace required. The inspector found this to be a significant concern. This is because the school does not have the resources to sustain the journey of improvement at the pace required, particularly when the additional improvement funding that the headteacher sourced runs out. Without the input from an academy sponsor, or significant additional support from the local authority and/or the Diocese of Shrewsbury, the headteacher's efforts to achieve a good quality of education for pupils by the time the school is due its section 5 reinspection may be restricted. The director of schools for the Diocese of Shrewsbury and the local authority have been made aware of this concern.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement

- Leaders and staff are highly committed to the school's pupils and they want the best for them. Staff morale remains high.
- Leaders are not afraid to take difficult decisions in relation to staffing to ensure that the teaching of the curriculum continues to improve.
- Leaders have created a strong culture where pupils can now learn effectively. Pupils value their teachers, and relationships between pupils and teachers are strong. Everyone is welcomed at Ellesmere Port Catholic High School.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement

- Leaders do not recognise the full impact that their curriculum choices may have on the learning and progress of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils.
- Leaders have not established if there is a connection between the number of disadvantaged pupils who are removed from lessons and the quality of the school's curriculum. Currently a disproportionate number of pupils who are removed from lessons are disadvantaged.
- The school's evaluation of its own performance remains overgenerous.

External support

At present, leaders have access to a wide range of effective and appropriate support to secure further school improvement. For example, in autumn 2019, the headteacher commissioned a leadership coach to provide a programme of strategic leadership development across the school. This ongoing programme has been split into four phases. The leaders receiving support include new subject leaders, existing subject leaders and post holders, senior leaders, and the final phase is leadership support and development for pastoral leaders.

Since the last monitoring visit, the headteacher successfully obtained funding through the Department for Education's emergency school improvement fund. This money is paying for external support from the Loreto Teaching School Alliance. Specialist leaders in education (SLEs) are working with the subject leaders of English, mathematics and science. Until recently, an SLE has also been working with the attendance team. However, this emergency funding is likely to be used up by summer 2020. At this point, this level of external support will cease. It is unlikely that the school will be able to fund the level of ongoing support required to improve the quality of education from its delegated budget.

The local authority continues to provide support to the school, but it too has concerns about the school's deficit budget. It is also concerned about how the level of support that the school requires can be sustained over time. The local authority is in regular discussion with the school and the Diocese of Shrewsbury about these matters through its school causing concern meetings.

The new business manager has received support with and training in human resources and financial management.

Priorities for further improvement

- Currently, the key stage 3 curriculum lacks depth and ambition in many subjects. Pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, do not receive an appropriate quality of education at key stage 3 because of weak curriculum planning. Leaders must ensure that the school's curriculum is planned effectively at key stage 3 so that pupils can achieve well.