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5 October 2021

Sara Crawshaw
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Dear Ms Crawshaw

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to English Martyrs Catholic School and Sixth Form College

Following my visit to your school on 23 September 2021, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the monitoring 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 to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school has received two successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic began. I discussed the ongoing impact of the pandemic with you and have taken that into account in my evaluation.

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

Leaders and those responsible for governance are not taking effective action in order for the school to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- accelerate the implementation of curriculum plans so that they improve the quality of education for all pupils

- ensure that the new governing body, and trust leaders, have a stronger focus on how well leaders are addressing the areas for improvement identified at the previous section 5 inspection
- develop a more complete picture of how the curriculum and additional support are meeting the needs of disadvantaged pupils.

Context

A new headteacher and deputy headteacher took up their posts in September 2021. The leadership team has been reorganised. The school has appointed four lead practitioners since the last inspection. The school joined the Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust in April 2020. A new local governing body has been formed.

COVID-19 has delayed the implementation of curriculum plans. Leaders and governors have had fewer opportunities to check the impact of improvement actions.

Main findings

Since the previous inspection, the school's improvement journey has been affected by a number of external factors. In April 2020, the school joined the Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust. This change occurred as leaders were responding to the pandemic. COVID-19 limited trust leaders' ability to check the impact of improvement actions. Despite these factors, leaders and governors have not done enough to address areas for improvement. Some two years after the previous inspection, many improvement actions remain in the early stages of development.

Since your appointment, you have accelerated the school's improvement journey. Before formally taking up post, you worked with leaders to refine curriculum plans. With your new deputy headteacher, you are bringing greater consistency to curriculum planning. You are now working with your team to check how these plans are working in the classroom. This is creating a momentum for greater improvement.

Since the previous inspection, your curriculum leaders have reviewed the curriculum. They have worked with colleagues from Durham advisory service to check content. As the trust has grown, curriculum leaders have started to work with the trust's own subject directors. This is helping to build expertise in curriculum and assessment. However, these actions remain relatively new. Leaders have had limited opportunities to judge their effectiveness.

The pupils I talked to are beginning to see the impact of new strategies. They described how teachers check their understanding at the start of lessons. They feel that homework is used in a more focused way to reinforce learning. Year 11 pupils feel that the quality of teaching is improving. All of the pupils I talked to felt safe. They believe English Martyrs is a school that promotes equality and respect. They are confident that teachers would respond to any concerns that they may share.

You meet with executive officers of the trust on a regular basis. This provides ongoing support for you in your role. It also provides the additional challenge needed to check the pace of improvement. You have worked with trust leaders to develop a more focused school development plan. This aims to analyse the root causes of underperformance. However, there remain areas where it is not clear how leaders and governors will measure improvement. Some success criteria remain too vague. On a number of occasions, improvement is measured by pupils making more progress without making it clear what this means.

Trust leaders have worked with governors to strengthen understanding of governors' responsibilities. Your governors now have the capacity to provide the support and challenge you need. Trust leaders are providing governors with better information to check school performance. However, these systems remain very new. The new governing body has not had the opportunity to focus sufficiently on important areas for improvement. It is over two years since the school received its second successive requires improvement judgement. In that time, governors have not checked leaders' improvement actions rigorously enough.

Increasing proportions of disadvantaged pupils are following separate science and English Baccalaureate subjects. This reflects greater curriculum ambition for these pupils. Leaders identify where disadvantaged pupils' progress is weaker than that of their peers. They put in intervention and support to address these gaps, particularly in Year 11. Despite this, actions to enhance the curriculum for disadvantaged pupils are not fully developed. Leaders lack a convincing picture of disadvantaged pupils' wider experience of the curriculum. It is not clear how actions are improving disadvantaged pupils' attendance, inclusion and wider involvement in school life.

You recognise the central importance of reading in the curriculum. You are carrying out new reading tests to identify strengths and weaknesses in reading. You are working with colleagues to offer tailored support to those who need help. Teachers are promoting reading in the context of their subjects. There is a greater focus on explaining the meaning behind key subject vocabulary. You have plans to encourage more pupils to read for pleasure. While at an early stage, it is clear that you have plans in place to make reading an important curriculum focus.

You are now increasing the pace of improvement. Leaders have a clearer sense of their roles and responsibilities. You are checking how teachers are using curriculum plans in the classroom. In history and geography, leaders have a compelling picture of the knowledge that pupils will acquire over time. Routines in lessons are consistent. Pupils are beginning to notice a positive difference. Leaders have prepared staff and pupils well for the use of remote education. The school is in a better place to overcome previous interruptions to the improvement journey.

Additional support

Your subject leaders have worked with the Durham local authority advisory team to develop their curriculum plans. External reviews have taken place on governance and special educational needs provision. More recently, your subject leaders have started to work with the trust's own subject directors to enhance their curriculum plans. They have also worked with trust leaders to check the accuracy of assessment.

The trust has provided extensive training for members of the local governing body. Senior members of the trust meet you on a regular basis to check the effect of improvement action.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you and your leadership team. I also met subject leaders with responsibility for English, geography, history and science. We discussed the actions taken to improve the school since the last inspection. I undertook lesson visits in English and science. I met groups of pupils in Years 9 and 11 to discuss behaviour, safety and the curriculum. I met the deputy chief executive officer of the Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust. I also held a meeting with trust directors and members of the local governing body. I looked at improvement plans and other documentation.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer of the Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust, the director of education for the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Hartlepool Borough. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Malcolm Kirtley
Her Majesty's Inspector