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John Haworth
Interim Head of School
St Mary's Roman Catholic Primary School, a Voluntary Academy
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Dear Mr Haworth

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of St Mary's Roman Catholic Primary School, a Voluntary Academy

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection that took place on 18 and 19 December 2024, on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills. The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 and was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in April 2024.

The purpose of a monitoring inspection is not to grade the school's key and (where applicable) provision judgements, but to identify and report on the school's progress. It is to highlight to the school and parents and carers any improvements that school leaders have made since the school's previous graded inspection.

During the inspection, I discussed with you and the executive headteacher, other senior leaders, the chief executive officer (CEO) of the trust, trustees, members of the local governing body, staff, and representatives of the local authority and the diocese the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent graded inspection. We discussed the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I reviewed a range of documentation, including that related to safeguarding. I also visited some lessons, reviewed pupils' work and met with staff, pupils and parents. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the school to no longer be judged as having serious weaknesses.

The progress made towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation

Following the graded inspection in April 2024, the substantive headteacher left the school. An interim executive headteacher and an interim head of school took up their posts shortly afterwards. The trust has commissioned a new interim headteacher to lead the school from January 2025. Currently, three classes are being taught by temporary teachers.

The school has taken the right actions, in the right order, to tackle the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection. As a result, the groundwork for further improvement has been laid. There is a secure foundation on which to build. The interim leadership arrangements have steadied the ship and won the confidence of a previously disheartened staff. Despite considerable change being introduced at pace, the school has remained mindful of staff's workload and well-being. Staff are buoyed up by the changes that have happened. Their morale has improved. Across the school, staff share a common desire to contribute to the school's continued success.

The school has successfully focused on its most pressing shortcomings. In particular, it took immediate action to ensure that pupils are safe. This means that the arrangements for safeguarding are now effective. The systems and procedures to protect pupils have been refined and staff have been suitably trained. Consequently, the signs that pupils may be at risk of harm are spotted quickly, reported clearly and acted on swiftly by staff. Effective use is made of external agencies to make sure that pupils and their families receive the support that they need.

Improvements to the personal, social, health and economic education curriculum mean that pupils have a better understanding of how to keep themselves safe. All of the pupils who shared their views said that they feel safe. They are confident that staff will listen to their concerns and take action to resolve their worries. Pupils trust staff. They especially value the extra help that they receive when they are facing challenging times at home or at school.

The school has reversed the culture of poor behaviour noted at the previous inspection. A new behaviour policy, which is understood by staff and pupils, has led to a shared understanding about what is, and what is not, acceptable behaviour. Pupils, staff and parents have all noticed the positive difference that this change has made during lessons and at social times. Classrooms are calm and pupils typically move around the school in a sensible manner. They enjoy playtimes and lunchtimes together, chatting and playing with their friends, without the worry of poor behaviour upsetting their day.

Lessons usually proceed without interruptions. Even so, some pupils quietly choose to opt out of their learning, especially when it requires them to think hard. Often, teachers do not pick up on this lack of engagement. While these pupils do not cause any disruption, they are not developing the positive attitudes to learning that they need to be successful.

Some pupils continue to find managing their behaviour difficult. However, the school has a much-improved oversight of those pupils who need extra help. In turn, this is leading to a better match of sensitive and effective support. This preventative work means that there are far fewer incidents where pupils' behaviour escalates to a point of no return.

The systems to monitor absence, and to identify the barriers that cause pupils to miss school, have been strengthened. This is beginning to make small inroads into the stubbornly low attendance rates of some pupils. Even so, many pupils, especially those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), miss school on a regular basis. This does little to help them to close the gaps in their learning.

There has been considerable change to the curriculum. A new mathematics programme is bearing fruit as pupils are beginning to develop greater mathematical fluency and a better recall of number facts. The provision for early reading remains secure. However, despite a renewed reading curriculum for older pupils, and the introduction of a school library, the school has given too little thought to what pupils will actually learn. Pupils who find reading difficult are not gaining the fluency and accuracy that they need to read as well as they should.

The school has introduced new schemes of work in most other curriculum subjects. This has provided teachers with greater clarity about what should be taught and when this should happen. However, this work is in its infancy. Currently, the implementation of the new curriculums is very mixed. The impact of this new approach varies widely from year group to year group and across different subjects. Too little has been done to check the gaps in pupils' learning to make sure that they have the knowledge that they need to learn new curriculum content. Some teachers do not have high enough expectations of what pupils should produce. Poor-quality work, which shows a lack of stamina or depth of understanding, is accepted as standard in some subjects and classes. This is especially true for the oldest pupils, who have the biggest gaps in their learning and the greatest distance to travel in order to catch up.

The school's identification of pupils with SEND has improved. This work, alongside the enhanced training that staff have received, means that pupils' needs are increasingly well understood and met.

Children in the early years benefit from activities that capture their interest and extend their knowledge of the world. For example, Nursery and Reception-age children took great delight in writing letters to Father Christmas and making a tasty treat for his reindeer. However, activities such as these do not have maximum impact. This is because children's language development does not have a high enough priority when adults are working and playing with children. Although children happily play alongside one another, they are less inclined to talk to each other.

The trust has increased its oversight of the school. A comprehensive improvement plan is acting as a strong vehicle to maintain the pace of change but also to enable those responsible for governance to keep an eye on the school's progress. Members of the local

governing body are eager for the school to succeed. They are beginning to ask more pertinent questions, but they are in the early stages of finding out more about the impact of the curriculum on pupils' learning.

Good use has been made of external support. For example, the school has worked closely with the local authority to hone its safeguarding practices, while the expertise in other schools has been harnessed to develop subject leadership.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, the CEO of the Romero Catholic Academy Trust, the director of education for the Diocese of Salford, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Lancashire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Jo Olsson
His Majesty's Inspector