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Vicky McDowell
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Dear Mrs McDowell

Special measures monitoring inspection of St Margaret Mary Catholic Primary School, Carlisle

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection that took place on 3 and 4 June 2025, 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 require special measures following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in October 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 other staff, the chief executive officer (CEO), trustees, representatives of the multi-academy trust and members of the local governing board 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 also visited lessons, met with pupils, looked at samples of pupils' work and evaluated a range of other documents, including the school improvement plan. I also talked with parents and representatives of the local authority and the Diocese of Lancaster. I have considered all of this information 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 requiring special measures.

HMCI strongly recommends that the school does not seek to appoint early career teachers.

The position regarding the appointment of early career teachers will be considered again during any monitoring inspection we carry out.

The progress made towards the removal of special measures

This monitoring inspection focused on those aspects that were identified as most needing improvement when the school was last inspected. This included leadership at all levels, including governance, and the quality of the curriculum, including for children in the early years and pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

The school has experienced significant staff absence and staffing changes since it was last inspected. For example, two interim headteachers have led the school from January 2025. The current interim headteacher took up post in April 2025. An early years lead teacher, and several new members of the local governing board have also been appointed.

The school has taken effective and decisive action to tackle the considerable shortcomings identified at the previous inspection. It has ensured that the weaknesses identified are being tackled in a systematic and considered manner, ensuring that the right things are prioritised in the right order. The school has worked closely with the trust to keep a sharp focus on putting the building blocks into place to bring about positive changes that are sustainable over time.

The quality of education that pupils are receiving is improving. Expectations of pupils' achievement have been raised. This is most apparent in the improvements made to the teaching of reading. The introduction of a new phonics programme has increased the consistency of pupils' experiences in their learning. Staff have been trained to deliver the programme well. Pupils read from books that better match the sounds that they have been taught. However, at times, pupils still do not have the fluency that they need to become confident readers. This hinders their reading and slows them down.

Improvements to the teaching of subjects beyond reading are at an earlier stage. Pupils' experience of learning across the school and across subjects remains uneven. This is due, to some degree, to the instability and changes in staffing and leadership. The legacy of a weak curriculum means that many pupils have still have large gaps in their basic skills, such as in writing and mathematics, which prevent them from being prepared for the next stage of their education. Work to ensure that teaching focuses on the most important essential knowledge pupils require in subjects beyond English and mathematics is at a very early stage. Additionally, gaps and misconceptions in pupils' learning beyond reading are not identified or addressed. As a result, too frequently, pupils are taught new subject content without having a secure understanding of important knowledge to build on.

The school has sought specialist advice and guidance to review and improve the provision for pupils with SEND. There is now a sharper focus on the accurate and timely identification and assessment of the needs of these pupils. Training for staff has focused on how to meet the different needs of pupils with SEND. While there are some signs that this work has begun to pay dividends, these improvements are at a very early stage. Adaptations to the delivery of the curriculum for pupils with SEND are not typically well considered. Pupils with SEND invariably rely on additional adults to support them to learn. This hinders pupils' independence in lessons.

Work has also begun to improve the provision in the early years. Children now benefit from established structures and routines that help them to focus on their learning. The school has worked with an early years advisor to better inform and prioritise curriculum and provision thinking. This work is beginning to bear fruit. For example, children are supported to apply their phonics learning in their writing in the reception class with greater success. Children in the Nursery Year are learning how to share and take turns with their peers with increasing harmony. However, frequently, children are not effectively supported to deepen or extend their understanding in their learning.

The strengthened leadership team has helped to steady the ship. The capacity to drive improvement is beginning to build. Subject leaders are beginning to grow into their roles, although this is still in its infancy for many.

Governance is stronger than it has been previously. Members of the local governing board have a clearer understanding of their role. They are better placed to offer appropriate challenge and support. Together with members of the trust board, they are keeping a close eye on the school's improvement journey and progress.

The school has the support of staff who are keen to play their part in the school's recovery. Workload and well-being have not been lost in the focus on improvement. Staff value the training and support that they have received, particularly regarding behaviour and the teaching of reading.

Leaders have used the support that they have received wisely to target the areas that need most improvement. The school has harnessed the close support of the trust to improve the curriculum, subject leadership, and governance. Productive partnerships with external agencies are being used effectively to further support the school's improvement.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the CEO of the Mater Christi multi-academy trust, the director of education for the Diocese of Lancaster, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Cumberland. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Rebecca Jewitt
His Majesty's Inspector