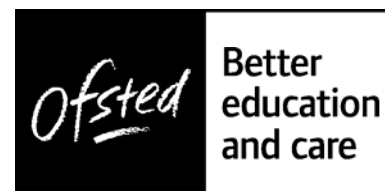


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4 July 2005

Mr T O'Grady  
Headteacher  
St Mary's Catholic Comprehensive School  
Benton Park Road  
Newcastle upon Tyne  
NE7 7PE

Dear Mr O'Grady

### **Implementation of St Mary's Catholic Comprehensive School's Action Plan**

Following my visit to your school on 22 and 23 June 2005, with my colleague Sara Morrissey HMI, we write to confirm the findings and to notify you of the outcomes.

As you know, the inspection was part of a policy involving a broader series of visits by HMI and Additional Inspectors to check on the development and improvement of schools where the section 10 inspection indicated that the school was underachieving. You will recall that the aims of the visit were to assess the progress made in addressing and eliminating underachievement and meeting the targets given in the action plan. We also evaluated standards of achievement and the quality of education, especially in relation to areas of underachievement.

During the visit we inspected 27 part lessons; attended an assembly and a tutorial session; scrutinised a wide range of documentation provided by the school; and held discussions with yourself and nominated staff on the causes and areas of underachievement. We also examined a range of the pupils' work and spoke informally with other staff and pupils.

On the basis of the evidence gathered during the visit, we made the following observations to you, the chair of the governing body, a governor, the headteacher designate, a representative from the LEA and a representative from the diocese.

The action plan which was produced following the March 2004 inspection addresses all the areas for improvement which were identified. There is an introductory section which sets the scene and provides a framework for the plan. Success criteria and the persons responsible for leading the actions are specified but there is too little indication of how or when the outcomes of the actions will be monitored and evaluated. Start and end dates for each action are given but there are no interim targets to enable the checking of progress at intervals throughout the process and to ensure that specific actions have been taken in good time.

In February and June 2005 action plan reports were written which detailed the actions which had taken place by those dates but did not effectively evaluate their impact. The plan is satisfactory overall but has some weaknesses. There is some confusion between methods and success criteria and the monitoring and evaluation procedures lack precision.

Test results at the end of Key Stage 3 in 2004 did not improve in comparison with all schools nationally, with the exception of science. There was a marked deterioration in English. In comparison with schools which have a similar level of free school meals the results are significantly better and are above average. In comparison with similar school in relation to pupils' prior attainment the results are average overall but this conceals below average performance in English and well above average performance in science.

The results in the GCSE examinations in 2004 were disappointing. The proportion of pupils attaining grades A\* to C in five or more subjects fell from 47 per cent in 2003 to 29 per cent in 2004. The average over the previous three years had been 38 per cent. The proportion of pupils attaining five or more grades A\* to G fell from 87 per cent to 78 per cent. The proportion of the pupils gaining one or more grades A\* to G has remained static for the past three years at 94 per cent. In comparison with national benchmarks and prior attainment the results were well below average except in the proportion of pupils gaining one or more A\* to G grade passes, which was average in the context of prior attainment. In comparison with benchmarks for schools in a similar context of free school meals the results were below average in the proportion of pupils gaining five or more passes with A\* to C grades and A\* to G grades but average in the proportion gaining one or more A\* to G grade passes.

Attainment in Year 13, a group of 38 students, shows improvement over the previous year.

The school has carried out a thorough analysis of its results making use of a range of available prior data and differentiating between groups of pupils within the cohort. Reference is made to the school's targets. Suitable actions were taken following the analysis including requirements that curriculum team leaders respond in some detail. The quality of their reports is variable but provides a useful starting point for further action to improve.

Standards in the lessons seen varied from good to unsatisfactory but in around a half, pupils were not achieving the levels expected for their age group. In particular, some of the higher-attaining pupils did not achieve as well as they could. This was mainly the result of low expectations and a lack of urgency in the lessons.

The quality of teaching was satisfactory or better in 23 lessons, including six in which it was good; it was unsatisfactory in four. The progress made by pupils was satisfactory or better in 23 lessons, but good in only two lessons.

This profile of teaching is unsatisfactory. There is not enough good teaching to address the underachievement of pupils in the school or to provide the challenge which will raise standards. A teaching and learning policy has not been fully established to provide a framework by which teachers can plan effectively. Monitoring of teaching has identified strengths and weaknesses but evaluation of the monitoring to target specific issues to raise standards is at an early stage of development.

The best lessons were well planned to match individual pupils' learning needs. Imaginative activities motivated pupils to participate actively in groups or individually. References were made to assessment criteria by teachers so that pupils knew what they had to do to improve. However, too much of the teaching was dull, and mundane activities failed to inspire. In lessons that were broadly satisfactory, there were a number of common weaknesses: learning objectives were imprecise and some instructions were unclear; expectations were not high enough and not enough use was made of assessment and target data to inform planning; potentially good resources were not used well enough to excite and engage the pupils or allow for active participation; higher attaining pupils were rarely challenged to extend their learning and strategies were not consistently used to support pupils with English as a second language; support for pupils with special educational needs was uneven. As a result, many of the pupils became compliant and passive in their learning. In the unsatisfactory lessons the teachers talked too much, the pace of learning was sluggish and the pupils lost interest.

Since the last inspection, the curriculum has been modified for pupils aged 14 to 19. At Key Stage 4 pupils are guided to make choices from a broader range of academic and vocational subjects; links with local schools have extended the variety of courses post-16. At Key Stage 3, progress in developing core subject strands across the curriculum is variable. Targeted intervention on reading has resulted from an analysis of assessment data but strategies to support the development of numeracy and information and communication technology are underdeveloped.

The pupils' behaviour and attitudes in lessons were satisfactory or better in 26 lessons and in five they were good. In lessons, pupils were courteous to each other and to adults. They responded well to teachers' instructions and in many lessons relationships between teachers and pupils were good. Behaviour is good around the school. In the dining hall, pupils socialise well and co-operate with each other and adults. The pupils' attitudes to learning are variable, and reflect the quality of teaching. In the Year 10 assembly, the pupils' behaviour was impeccable and they were respectful during a period of quiet reflection and prayer. The school has developed and refined policies which promote positive attitudes to school, focusing on uniform, equipment and readiness to learn. The newly established discipline for learning policy embraces the catholic ethos of the school and pupils are encouraged to make positive choices to support their learning. Analysis of exclusion data reveals that pupils are beginning to respond to the heightened

expectations of behaviour and the number of exclusions is falling compared with previous years.

Attendance has improved and for this year has exceeded the target of 90.2 per cent by reaching 91.3 per cent which is broadly in line with the national median. The educational welfare officer has rigorously applied strategies to promote good attendance and punctuality and the school's policy to meet and greet the pupils each morning sets a positive tone for the day. Rewards and prizes are awarded for high attendance and good attendance is given a high profile in assemblies.

The core senior leadership team which consists of the headteacher, the deputy headteacher and two assistant headteachers is hardworking and committed to school improvement. Roles and responsibilities are clear. Meetings take place once or twice a week and an appropriate balance between operational and long-term planning is evident. The extended leadership team which meets monthly includes the head of upper school, the head of foundation school, the head of senior college, the director of the EIC and the director of teaching and learning. The larger group operates with a specific policy focus for identified and limited periods of time and is expected to provide a broader perspective on different aspects of the school. The headteacher is aware that there is a need to further develop the roles of the members of the extended team through targeted training to increase their involvement and effectiveness in driving forward actions to raise attainment.

Greater expectations have been placed on middle managers, particularly the curriculum team leaders. This is appropriate but although staff recognise the requirements they do not all possess the range of skills necessary to fulfil the role satisfactorily, particularly in furthering the education of the pupils through rigorous monitoring of their learning in the classroom. The learning co-ordinators maintain their traditional functions as former heads of year and are at an early stage in the process of developing their role in relation to monitoring progress.

From September 2004 the school has benefited from access to a school improvement partner. He visits the school on a regular basis and produces monitoring reports which the school finds extremely useful. He also chairs the joint LEA and school support and monitoring group which meets to evaluate progress on the action plan. The LEA is providing good support for the school, requests for which are usually channelled through the monitoring group.

The governing body is well organised and has an appropriate committee structure. The governors' action plan executive (GAPE) has been established to monitor the progress made in implementing the action plan. One of the four governors involved acts as the chair and the link with the LEA and school monitoring group. The chair of the governing body is kept properly informed. He recognises that further progress needs to be made quickly.

The school is making limited progress towards raising pupils' attainment and eliminating underachievement.

In relation to the action plan and the impact of the actions taken, limited progress has been made in addressing the key tasks which relate to the school's underachievement.

This visit has raised serious concerns about the standard of education provided by the school and I am recommending a return visit.

I am copying this letter to the chair of governors, the Director of Education and Libraries for Newcastle upon Tyne and the Director of Education for Diocesan Schools Commission for Hexham and Newcastle. This letter will also be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

**SUE HANDS**  
**Additional Inspector**

cc: chair of governors  
LEA  
diocese