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Mr J Murphy
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Murphy

Ofsted survey inspection programme – narrowing the gap in literacy and numeracy

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 12-13 February 2009 to look at work in literacy and numeracy.

As outlined in the initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of literacy and numeracy, my visit had a particular focus on how effectively the school is narrowing the gap for students at risk of not reaching the expected level of attainment for their age. The visit also evaluated the level of expertise within the school to support students with learning English as an additional language.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included interviews with senior managers and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of five lessons and visits to other settings.

The overall effectiveness in narrowing the gap for students at risk of not reaching the expected level of attainment for their age in literacy and numeracy was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in literacy and numeracy is outstanding. Standards are high. The progress of students working below the expected level of attainment on entry to the school is outstanding.

- The attainment of students when they join the school in Year 7 is broadly average in English and mathematics.
- Students make outstanding progress and the proportion which achieves five or more good passes at GCSE including English and mathematics is well above the national average.
- Students who join the school below the expected levels for their age make progress at a faster rate than their peers, enabling most of them to catch up and obtain good passes at GCSE in English and mathematics.
- Relationships in the school are very good, rooted in the strong Catholic ethos. Students feel that they belong and are valued, factors which underpin their progress.
- The few students who join the school with little knowledge of English do well.

Quality of teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy

The quality of teaching and learning in literacy and numeracy is outstanding.

- Literacy and numeracy are promoted very well in subjects beyond English and mathematics. There is clear evidence of strategies to develop literacy and numeracy in the work of many subjects.
- In the best lessons teachers use key words effectively and provide students with opportunities for extended writing and discussion. However, in a few lessons students have limited opportunities to develop their speaking and listening skills.
- Teachers use information and communication technology well.
- Very good marking of students' work reinforces literacy well. The marking in art, drama, English and religious education is of exceptionally high quality.
- Numeracy is promoted well in some subjects but the practice is inconsistent. In some subjects reference to numeracy lacks sufficient depth and challenge.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum for literacy and numeracy is outstanding.

- The curriculum supports literacy and numeracy through an agreed whole school approach to their development.
- Small group sizes and additional curriculum time enable all students to progress well in mathematics. English also benefits from smaller group sizes for some students in Years 10 and 11.
- There is an exceptionally wide range of additional measures to promote literacy and numeracy. These range from planned activities during registration time, schemes to promote reading in conjunction with the school library; and residential activities in the holidays.
- A series of special days are provided for targeted students whose progress in English and mathematics is a cause for concern. Initiatives are tailored to suit individual needs and are led by specialist teachers from the English and humanities departments.

- All departments are expected to support literacy and numeracy, through schemes of work and planning, and there is helpful guidance to teachers in the staff handbook.
- The curriculum has no specific adaptations for those few students who speak English as an additional language. They are effectively supported by individual arrangements that match their needs.

Leadership and management of literacy and numeracy

The leadership and management of provision to develop students' literacy and numeracy skills are outstanding.

- There is a clear vision in the school, established and pursued by yourself and the senior leadership team. The high priority given to students' development of literacy and numeracy skills underpins the vision and work of the school.
- This vision is exemplified in staff's schemes of work together with curriculum and lesson planning.
- A key element driving improvement is a very strong focus on numeracy.
- The school's well-established monitoring system rigorously tracks students' progress. They clearly understand the level at which they are working and what they need to do to get to the next stage.
- Responsibility for literacy and numeracy across the school rests with the heads of department in English and mathematics. Their roles are ambitious but insufficiently clearly defined.

English as an additional language

The level of expertise within the school to support students with learning English as an additional language is satisfactory.

- None of the staff has specific qualifications to teach English as an additional language but the coordinator for special educational needs is responsible for the support they receive.
- The number of students who need extra help with English is very small. The school meets their needs in a variety of ways, for example through mentoring. Their progress is monitored by an adviser from the local authority.

Inclusion

Inclusion in literacy and numeracy is outstanding.

- Saint Michael's is a highly inclusive school. Students receive excellent care, guidance and support.
- Attendance is satisfactory. There are high levels of participation in the many enrichment and extra curricular opportunities that the school provides.
- Assessment and monitoring arrangements are thorough and inclusive, enabling the welfare and progress of all students, particularly the most vulnerable, to be very well met.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- developing greater consistency in the way teachers promote literacy and numeracy through their subjects
- ensuring there is specific expertise in the school for students learning English as an additional language.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop literacy and numeracy in the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Bob Roberts
Additional Inspector