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Mr J McNerney
Headteacher
St Peter's RC High School
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Dear Mr McNerney

Ofsted subject survey: good practice in promoting equality

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on the 19 January 2009, to look at work in promoting equality.

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 without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: observing lessons, scrutinising school documentation, discussions with parents, pupils, teachers, managers, governors and other professionals who provide additional support to the pupils in the school.

The quality of provision to promote equalities is outstanding.

Features of good practice observed

- As headteacher, you set high expectations for student achievement in all aspects of school life, which is shared by staff. The senior leadership team know the students well and communication between this team and all staff with regard to student well-being, endeavour and achievement is excellent. Regular staff briefings ensure that all staff know about any relevant current issues concerning individual students. As a consequence, they respond appropriately and adapt lessons as necessary. The leadership team make a forensic analysis of the performance data held on individual students and, as a result, is able to design its provision to meet individual needs. Flexibility within the structure of planning the school day supports the students' good achievement.

- The school serves an area of economic regeneration and a large proportion of its students experience severe economic and social deprivation. The school's designation as a Business and Enterprise College in 2006 exemplifies the leadership team's imaginative outlook, provides for the needs of the local community and serves to raise the aspirations for student achievement, both academically and vocationally. Students are involved in 'Enterprise days' where they practise the skills of communication and teamwork to complete a challenge. They experience master classes in marketing and mathematics and are provided with opportunities to practise interview techniques with professional coaches.
- The school makes excellent use of partner organisations. This provides opportunities for students to experience both work place activities and taster sessions at universities to raise their expectations. Some students have taken part in a residential summer course with a view to a career in medicine; others have experienced an 'Is teaching for me?' course, aimed particularly at black and ethnic minority students. As a result, several vulnerable students have gone on to university and aim to pursue professional careers. Students who spoke to the inspector are aiming high for careers in medicine, accountancy, law, the police and drama.
- The school provides a flexible approach to examination courses. It quickly recognises where a student is not achieving their potential on a course and is prepared to change the student's options, making adjustments to its provision as necessary. This no-blame culture enables students to learn effectively. Good use is made of early entry examinations in English and mathematics and as a result the number of passes at A* to C, including mathematics and English, is increasing. All students gain qualifications and the vast majority continue in full time education when they leave at age 16. The school consistently sets targets for achievement well above those expected locally. Students frequently meet those high expectations, mainly because of the high quality teaching and outstanding level of additional booster support the school provides.
- Students from minority ethnic backgrounds, black African students in particular, reach standards well-above the national average and have particularly high aspirations. For example, one student from this group is aiming to become an international solicitor; he already speaks at least three languages fluently and knows exactly what qualifications he needs to achieve his ambition. Students from minority ethnic groups say the school supports them well and they do not experience discrimination. They are keen to explain that school encourages them to aim high and they say that teachers are always prepared to spend additional time with them during lunch breaks or after-school if they need extra help.

- The school provides excellent pastoral care and guidance. It employs two pastoral managers from non-teaching backgrounds who liaise with the heads of year and form tutors. The pastoral managers have a thorough knowledge of student backgrounds. On occasions where there are instances of poor behaviour or issues which are affecting the student's studies, home visits are made by the pastoral manager, who is well regarded by parents and students alike. These visits often result in an improved attitude to school. Older students act as mentors to younger students and all students who are new to the school are allocated a mentor who shares the same language or similar background. One new student said that 'he keeps being asked if he is ok throughout the day which is nice because it shows that people here care'. There are excellent systems to support good attendance and students say that they enjoy the rewards offered.
- The school provides outstanding additional support for students with emotional and/or behaviour needs. One imaginative solution for vulnerable students experiencing difficulties is 'therapeutic horticulture', where gardeners are trained counsellors who work with students in the glass house and tend the gardens. This is highly successful. Over 40 students take part and it has transformed the life opportunities of some students. Good use is made of external behaviour support workers to help students from minority ethnic groups who have a limited understanding of English. A training programme is underway to enable school staff to continue this work and students say they enjoy these sessions and it gives them more confidence to speak in lessons.
- The curriculum is highly relevant to students' needs and interests and promotes equality of opportunity outstandingly well. For example, in one geography lesson, the push and pull factors of migration were discussed and students were able to explain their own diverse experiences of migration to enrich the lesson. Staff know the impact that speaking English as an additional language has on these students understanding of British culture, for example, when studying Shakespeare. Their lessons take this into account and an excellent emphasis is placed on practical and group tasks, to ensure students are not isolated by their limited cultural knowledge and language skills. An excellent emphasis is placed on sport and the arts. The school is highly successful in these aspects of its work, both on a day to day basis and as extra-curricular activities. The students say they feel proud of their school's outstanding national and international achievements in basketball, football and drama productions.
- The school makes outstanding progress with pupils who have a learning difficulty and/or disability, including those with statements of educational need. It employs specialist learning mentors in mathematics and English to act as coaches for students on a one to one basis. Teaching assistants provide effective support for students in lessons. Students in Year 7 who have difficulty in learning the basic skills of mathematics, reading and writing are given additional lessons at the start of each day. They enjoy these sessions and the results show that they make good progress.

Areas for development

- Continue to narrow the achievement gap and raise student aspirations, particularly for lower achieving white working class boys.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop promoting equalities at St Peter's RC High School.

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

Ofsted gathers information on the immediate and longer-term impact of survey inspections, both on the institutions themselves, and with a view to improving its own processes. To this end, I should be grateful if you would complete the attached questionnaire and return it within the next ten days. We have also just sent a copy of the questionnaire by email. Please return your completed questionnaire to either the email or postal address on the form, not to me. We may also contact some schools by telephone after several months in order for us to gain a picture of longer-term impact. Thank you in advance for your assistance

Yours sincerely

Gill Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector