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Mr Phil Smith
Headteacher
Blessed William Howard Catholic School
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Dear Mr Smith

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a notice to improve

Thank you for the help which you and your senior colleagues gave when I inspected your school on 14 December 2009 and for the information which you provided during my visit. Please also pass on my thanks to staff, students, governors and representatives of Staffordshire School Improvement Service who gave their time to talk me.

Since the last inspection, new heads of department in English and citizenship have taken up post. This term staff turnover has been higher than the norm for the school.

As a result of the inspection on 25 and 26 March 2009, the school was asked to:

- raise standards and increase rates of progress, especially in English, by ensuring that senior leaders improve the accuracy and use of assessment information to set challenging targets
- ensure that students are frequently informed about the progress they are making, so that they have a better understanding about how they can improve their work and reach their targets
- ensure all teachers make full use of assessment information so that students' work is matched precisely to their different learning needs
- improve the provision for health education and citizenship.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making satisfactory progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the pupils' achievement.

The results of test and examinations in July 2009 show an improving picture of achievement. Students in Year 9 largely met or exceeded their expectations. Although the school narrowly missed some of its challenging GCSE targets, the

percentage of students who gained 5 A* to C including English and mathematics rose from 53% in 2008 to 61%, helped by a 9% rise in A* to C passes in English. Results improved in many other subjects too, but the school recognises that achievement in design and technology is well below that expected and that this is a cause for concern. In the sixth form, the school sustained its near 100% pass rate at GCE A-level and increased the proportion of students who gained a grade A or B by one third. The school's data shows that achievement is continuing to rise and that it is well placed to meet its targets in 2010.

The headteacher's and senior leaders' unrelenting drive to improve the school is readily embraced by the staff, who are working hard to make the school better. As part of the Gaining Ground initiative, the school is working successfully with another local Catholic school to share good management practice. It uses students' past performance effectively to set them challenging targets. Leaders have used consultants to ensure that their assessments are accurate. The school's tracking system is robust, regularly updated and used effectively to check students' progress and to monitor the impact of teaching. Any slowing of progress or weaknesses in teaching are quickly spotted and the school takes appropriate remedial action to improve matters, a process that is becoming increasingly effective in eradicating underachievement, especially in English.

Nearly all students know the level at which they are working and the challenging targets they must reach. They say that this term their academic guidance has been very helpful and much better than in the past. The new tutorial arrangements are providing them with a good understanding of their progress overall and the particular subjects in which they need to improve. Marking and other feedback from teachers is regular, but of variable quality. There is some outstanding practice, for example in history, where students have opportunities to check each others work to gain a clear understanding of how they can improve their own answers. In some books, students' readily respond to their teacher's comments by repeating or improving work to gain higher marks. However, this is not yet the consistent picture and the school acknowledges that it needs to raise the quality of marking in the small minority of books where teachers do not provide students with enough guidance.

Teachers are using assessment data satisfactorily to plan challenging work for classes and this is becoming more effective as teachers gain practice and confidence in the process. Many teachers identify those students who are in the upper or lower ability groups in their class so that they can provide them with appropriate tasks that match their needs closely. This means that students are increasingly working hard in lessons.

The new head of department has established a citizenship curriculum for Years 7 to 9 that meets requirements. Health education provision, including sex education, has been reviewed and a new scheme of work is now in place. It is too early to judge the success of these initiatives but early signs are encouraging. For example, Year 9

students talked excitedly about the interesting and relevant work they had undertaken in citizenship this term.

Good aspects of the lessons observed showed that students have positive attitudes to their learning and that they behave well. Teachers were making good use of ICT to engage students and develop their learning. Students say that lessons are more enjoyable this term because their learning activities are increasingly practical and relevant. Teachers set lessons targets but did not always explain them in sufficient detail to ensure that students were clear as to what they needed to do to succeed. Teachers provided valuable opportunities for students to discuss and clarify their ideas in groups, which developed their understanding well. At times, the teacher took too great a lead in the class discussions that followed, which meant that students did not have enough time to share their views in detail with the class.

Success in the school's Arts specialism is used well to promote learning and positive attitudes towards school. For example, all Year 7 pupils took part in a production at a local theatre last year. This was linked to a yearlong creative curriculum project. Over half of them gained a qualification in the Arts by the time they started Year 8. This adds to their enjoyment of school, promotes self-confidence and develops self-esteem. The school uses its high GCSE results in art and music to raise aspirations by showing students that they can achieve outstanding results.

Effective support from local authority advisors and consultants has led to improvements in the quality of teaching and monitoring arrangements. They have worked in partnership with the headteacher to provide training for staff and strengthen the roles of middle and senior leaders.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Gerald Griffin

Additional Inspector