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Mr Mark Cooper
Mount St Mary's Catholic High School
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Dear Mr Cooper

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Mount St Mary's Catholic High School

Following my visit to your school on 16 November 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in May 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its previous section 5 inspection the school was also judged to require improvement.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- ensure that plans have both clear timescales for when actions will take place and how checks will be made on whether the actions have had the desired impact on students
- make sure that all external support is managed well and coordinated.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, four curriculum leaders and four governors. I undertook two learning walks, one with your deputy headteacher and the other with the associate leader in charge of teaching. I met with a group of Key Stage 4 students, the school improvement adviser from the local authority and the national leader in education (NLE) from the Yorkshire Teaching School Alliance, recently commissioned to support the school. I evaluated the school action plan and other monitoring evidence including minutes from governing body meetings and notes of visits from the school improvement adviser.

Context

Since the inspection a number of teachers have left the school. These include the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo), one science teacher, one mathematics teacher, two English teachers, two art teachers, two modern foreign languages teachers and one teacher of religious education. A new SENCo was appointed very recently and new teachers have been appointed to replace those who have left, along with a new history teacher.

Main findings

You, and the staff I spoke with, realise and accept that the school requires improvement for a second time because the pace of improvements has not been quick enough. Since the recent inspection you and other senior leaders are showing a greater determination and desire to tackle underperformance more rapidly. There is now a greater emphasis on checking whether actions are having a positive impact. Curriculum leaders especially see that they are being held increasingly accountable.

Older students have started to see signs of improved teaching. They say lessons are better planned and that work is becoming more challenging. Students feel that the new approaches to marking and feedback are helping them improve their work. Nevertheless they are quick to point out that further improvements are still needed, especially in mathematics, where the quality of teaching still depends too much on which teacher they have.

Attendance is showing signs of improvement and persistent absence rates are starting to fall. This is due to the greater focus in assemblies on the importance of good attendance, the improved range of rewards on offer for good attendance, and staff collecting some students from home and bringing them in to school.

Some curriculum leaders still have much to do to ensure that they are consistently effective in checking and improving the quality of teaching in their departments and bringing about faster student progress. Senior leaders regularly work with, and support, curriculum leaders in reviewing the progress students are making. While helpful, these reviews need to be clearer in terms of how and when identified areas of weaknesses, especially in relation to teaching, will be tackled.

Governors are becoming increasingly challenging. They ask relevant and searching questions, especially in relation to the way student assessment information is presented. Governors want to see school plans sooner so they can discuss and consider them in good time before their meetings. The school action plan could be a more useful tool to aid school improvement by including clearer timescales for when actions will be taken and by whom, and how checks will be made.

The pupil premium review has led to the funding of additional staff in mathematics, including more intervention classes to help disadvantaged students make faster progress. However, the assessment information to be collected in December will provide a clearer indication as to whether this work is having a significant impact. While there has also been some initial work in raising the profile of mathematics skills across the curriculum, leaders recognise that there is still more to do in this area.

Ofsted may carry out further monitoring inspections and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The Trinity Academy of Halifax, Ralph Thoresby High School and the Yorkshire Teaching School Alliance have been commissioned to support the school. This support has only recently begun, and while it is valued by staff it is too early to evaluate the impact of this work. With the number of different schools being used to provide support, it is not clear enough how this is being effectively managed and coordinated to avoid potential duplication or overload.

The local authority school improvement adviser has accurately confirmed that aspects of teaching are improving and has identified areas where further improvements are required. However, weaknesses in school planning have not been identified quickly enough and this makes it difficult to see how effective checks are being made on the overall progress the school is making.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Leeds City Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Phil Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector