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26 May 2016

Kevin Shepherd  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Shepherd

### **Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Aidan's Catholic Academy**

Following my visit to your academy on 13 May 2016, 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 academy since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in December 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

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

### **Evidence**

During the visit, I met with you and a range of senior and middle leaders to discuss the actions taken to improve the school since the last inspection. I also met governors and a group of pupils to discuss their learning and any changes they had identified since the last inspection. I undertook a learning walk with yourself and reviewed work in books and assessment changes with a group of middle leaders. I examined school improvement programmes as well as other documents, including the school's self-evaluation and assessment information on current progress.

## **Context**

The headteacher and deputy headteacher were permanently appointed to their roles in February 2016. A new head of science was appointed in April 2016. A new attendance officer will take up post in June 2016. A geography teacher was appointed in March 2016 and a history teacher in April 2016. A new head of geography will take up post in September 2016.

## **Main findings**

Leadership has been strengthened since the last inspection. The permanent appointment of the headteacher and deputy headteacher has provided the stability and clarity needed to accelerate improvement. Expectations of both staff and pupil performance are higher and more rigorous actions have been taken to address underperformance. Staff have been assisted through support programmes and additional capacity has been built with the appointment of new subject leads for science and geography. High-performing subject leaders have joined the leadership team to add further weight to the drive for improvement.

New systems are providing a stronger framework for improvement. Pupil progress is now tracked more thoroughly, with projected grades checked against work in books and progress in lessons through regular standards meetings. External partners have brought additional scrutiny to this process. Performance management objectives have been reviewed to explicitly address pupil progress. As a result, teachers are becoming much more accountable for the performance of the pupils in their classes.

These improving systems are supported by more effective leadership approaches as pupils feel school leaders are more open about the need to develop and communicate more effectively.

The ability of governors to hold leaders to account has been fortified by renewed departmental links and training activities that have given them better knowledge of what to look for in their monitoring activities. The information they receive on performance is becoming more accurate as a result of regular standards meetings and validation from external partners.

Leaders have taken action to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. New standards for assessment have been set and as a result pupils are increasingly acting upon feedback in order to improve the quality of their work. Revised approaches to lesson planning are making teachers more aware of the needs and abilities of pupils and of the tasks they need to set to enable pupils to make good progress. There are signs that these new approaches are leading to stronger outcomes in subjects such as English, religious studies and history but they are less effectively implemented in other subjects.

Extensive training has been brokered with external partners to improve the quality

of teaching, with a large number of staff enrolled on outstanding teaching programmes. The school's own training programme has provided important sessions on questioning, differentiation and planning and many of these strategies are beginning to work their way into the classroom. However, on occasions this has not been directly targeted at those teachers who would most benefit from this training.

In lessons, there is evidence of increasing challenge. Teachers are beginning to use data to inform planning and pupils feel there is a clearer emphasis on the actions they need to take to make more progress. Pupils described how clearly shared lesson objectives were giving additional pace and purpose to their learning. Stronger study regimes and facilities at key stage 4 and 5 were creating a more studious environment with increasing challenge and, although not universally popular, pupils accepted they would lead to stronger results 'in the long run'.

School leaders have worked with external partners to improve outcomes for pupils eligible for the pupil premium. Close tracking, dedicated use of funds and personalised support are driven by the school's pupil premium champion while the allocation of a governor to specifically monitor provision and progress is adding further levels of accountability. There are signs that the progress gaps for these pupils are beginning to narrow.

Since December, leaders have balanced actions to effect rapid change with longer-term strategies to strengthen leadership and improve the quality of teaching. On occasions, strategies have been too reliant upon interventions such as additional lessons and extra support as overall teaching is not yet strong enough. The intense efforts to improve outcomes for Year 11 have meant that improvements at key stage 3 are not as fully developed. The outcomes of December's inspection have accelerated change. Projected outcomes for 2016 are showing a more positive picture. Leaders now need to consistently embed new systems while providing middle leaders and the wider staff with further training to support their work in improving the quality of teaching and learning.

### **External support**

The school has worked with a number of outstanding teaching schools to diagnose areas of underperformance and strengthen teaching and learning. Formal professional development has addressed key issues such as lesson planning and the use of questioning, alongside the presentation of work in books. Leaders have invested considerable resource in placing 16 colleagues on programmes to promote outstanding teaching, reflecting a desire to build long-term and sustainable capacity for improvement. A range of further partnerships have helped to verify the accuracy and reliability of assessment. Visits to schools with strong provision for pupils eligible for the pupil premium have sharpened the school's improvement strategy. External partnerships have been used to add rigour and challenge to quality assurance processes, providing leaders and particularly governors with a more accurate picture of the school's performance.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Sunderland. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Malcolm Kirtley  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**