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Mr Ben Davis  
Headteacher  
St Ambrose Barlow RC High School  
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Dear Mr Davis

### **Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Ambrose Barlow RC High School**

Following my visit to your school on 06 December 2017, 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 October 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- urgently review the effectiveness of the school's systems to prevent and address bullying in all its forms
- act upon the findings of the review to strengthen systems for tackling bullying so all pupils feel safe in school
- make sure that improvements to the quality of teaching lead to pupils making faster progress, particularly disadvantaged pupils in English and mathematics
- further reduce variabilities in the quality of teaching
- extend the range of measures that are used to evaluate the effectiveness of the Year 7 catch-up funding.

## **Evidence**

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, other senior leaders, a group of middle leaders, pupils, members of the governing body, a representative from the local authority, an educational consultant and the executive principal of St Patrick's Teaching School to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school improvement plan and self-evaluation document were evaluated. I also looked closely at the school's website and scrutinised a range of documents, including those relating to the school's use of the pupil premium and Year 7 catch-up funding. I looked at leaders' systems for monitoring pupils' progress and tracking attendance and behaviour. I conducted a learning walk with leaders that looked at teaching in a range of subjects, and listened to a number of pupils read.

## **Context**

Since the previous inspection, a new chair of governors has been appointed from within the governing body. You have also appointed a new deputy headteacher to lead on the development of the school's culture and pastoral systems. You have changed the roles and responsibilities of senior leaders. The number of senior leaders who are directly responsible for leading subjects has been reduced. You have created an 'extended' senior leadership team to provide a number of middle leaders with the opportunity to broaden their experience and increase the scope of their work. You have made significant changes to subject leadership within the school. You appointed new heads of English and humanities shortly before the previous inspection. Since the inspection, you have also appointed new leaders of mathematics, modern foreign languages (MFL) and art. You have also made additional appointments to strengthen leadership within English, mathematics, humanities and science. Furthermore, you have appointed a number of new teachers in different subjects to accommodate the growth in student numbers in the sixth form. You have changed the curriculum to introduce a three-year key stage 4 and you have changed the structure of the school day so that lessons are now one hour in length rather than 45 minutes.

## **Main findings**

You have overseen significant improvements since the previous inspection and there is clear evidence to indicate that the school is moving forwards in many important areas. You have a perceptive understanding of why the school's performance has declined in recent years. You also have a clear and balanced understanding of the school's current strengths and weaknesses. Your plans to improve the school are broad and ambitious. You have improved systems for monitoring the quality of teaching and pupils' progress, and this is providing middle and senior leaders with clear evidence of what has improved and what still needs to be done. Leaders throughout the school acknowledge that a great deal of progress has been made, but are under no illusions about the scale of the challenges still facing the school.

The further decline in pupils' performance in the 2017 GCSE examinations was anticipated by leaders. Moreover, leaders are acutely aware that the performance of disadvantaged pupils in English and mathematics is well below that of other pupils nationally.

The effectiveness of governance has improved markedly since the previous inspection. A new chair of governors has been appointed from within the governing body. She leads with tact and determination, and ensures that a strong sense of moral purpose guides the work of governors. Governors have used the previous inspection and subsequent external review of governance as catalysts for improving their effectiveness. They have undertaken a broad range of training to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding. They have also rationalised the sub-committee structure to improve the clarity and purpose of their work. They use external support to validate what leaders tell them about developments within the school. They have become increasingly adept at challenging leaders and holding them to account. They fully understand that the school 'is on a journey' and that there is still 'a great deal to be done'.

You have strengthened middle leadership considerably. New subject leaders have brought fresh ideas and a sense of optimism to the school. Middle leaders say that they feel empowered by recent changes. Typical comments include: 'There is greater accountability, yet we are more collaborative' and 'We now feel invested in the school.' Middle leaders now use information about pupils' progress discerningly, to make careful improvements to the curriculum and teaching. They also ensure that a concerted focus is maintained on areas that are pressing priorities for the school, such as the progress made by disadvantaged pupils and the development of literacy across the curriculum.

You have effectively implemented a broad strategy to improve teaching. Teachers are increasing their expectations of what pupils are capable of achieving. This is leading to teachers increasing the level of challenge they provide in work set for pupils. Teachers' expectations of pupils' extended writing are particularly high. They also use effective strategies for ensuring that pupils have the skills and understanding to write with increasing fluency and technical accuracy. Middle leaders have changed the curriculum to increase the level of challenge in key stage 3. For example, pupils in Year 8 now study 'To kill a mockingbird' to prepare them more effectively for key stage 4. Observations of teaching during the inspection indicated that the most able pupils, in particular, are rising to the challenge of being set more demanding work. Despite the improvements that have been made, you are aware that more needs to be done to reduce variabilities in the quality of teaching within departments and across the curriculum.

You have also been successful at improving the quality of assessment and feedback. The marking and feedback policy has been rewritten, and members of staff diligently follow the requirements of the new policy. Pupils told the inspector that they now have a clear understanding of how well they are doing in each subject,

what their strengths are and what they need to do to improve. Leaders have greatly improved the quality of assessment. They also undertake work with other schools to ensure that their assessment of pupils' abilities is accurate. Despite these improvements, pupils are not making quicker progress. In particular, the wide differences in progress between disadvantaged pupils and others are showing only glimpses of improvement.

You and your team have transformed the effectiveness of systems to track and monitor the progress, behaviour and attendance of pupils. Leaders now present data in an accessible format, which focuses on key groups of pupils and provides a clear overview of progress over time. You have also reformed the way that pupils' targets are set to ensure that the school has high aspirations for all pupils.

Leaders have improved plans to accelerate the progress made by disadvantaged pupils in response to the external review of the school's use of the pupil premium. The plans identify appropriate barriers to achievement that disadvantaged pupils at the school typically face. Leaders' plans for the pupil premium are now tightly focused on removing these barriers. Furthermore, leaders have given careful consideration to how the effectiveness of different strategies will be measured. Similarly, leaders have improved plans for using Year 7 catch-up funding. Staff now carefully assess all pupils' reading ages on entry to the school. This information is then used to ensure that identified pupils receive appropriate support that aims to quicken the progress they make with the development of their literacy skills. Leaders also have similar plans in place for those needing to catch up in mathematics. Despite these improvements, leaders are not using a broad range of evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of the catch-up funding. As a result, they are not developing a holistic understanding of the progress made by targeted pupils in English and/or mathematics.

Despite the improvements being made to leadership and teaching, there is a real danger that the impact of this work is being undermined by low pupil morale. During the inspection, I spoke with a number of pupils who expressed their dissatisfaction with the school's culture and ethos. In particular, they were critical of the way that the school deals with bullying. Several of the pupils said they have been the victims of bullying, and that bullying is still too commonplace at the school. As a consequence, some pupils have lost faith in the way that the school deals with bullying, and therefore are reticent to report it when it does occur. These concerns were echoed by a parent who contacted Ofsted during the inspection. They also coincide with an increase in complaints made to Ofsted about the school, some of which are to do with behaviour, safety and bullying.

You presented evidence to indicate that the views articulated by these pupils may not be typical. Furthermore, you demonstrated that the school takes its responsibility to tackle bullying very seriously. You also explained how you have already started to reform the school's pastoral systems, and indicated that the scope of these plans will broaden in the future.

On balance, this evidence indicates that the school's systems for dealing with bullying may not be sufficiently strong. As a matter of urgency, you should therefore review the effectiveness of your systems for preventing and addressing bullying. As part of this review, you should consult with different stakeholders to establish a broad and balanced view of the prevalence of bullying. Once this review is complete, you should take appropriate action to ensure that systems for tackling bullying are strengthened so that all pupils feel safe. As discussed during the inspection, I will monitor the effectiveness of the school's response to these concerns.

### **External support**

Since the previous inspection in October 2016, the school has been proactive in seeking external support and has become very outward-facing in its approach. The school has been closely and ably supported by St Patrick's Teaching School. The teaching school has provided ongoing support to improve teaching in English, mathematics, science, humanities, information communication technology and MFL. You are supported by the executive principal of the teaching school, who is a national leader of education, to develop different aspects of the school's work. The external review of the school's use of the pupil premium was conducted by leaders from the teaching school. The external review of governance was brokered through the local authority. You have also enlisted the support of a school improvement consultant to develop leadership. Moreover, you have commissioned external reviews of the school's safeguarding practices and behaviour systems. You have worked closely with School 21 in London (which has an excellent reputation for innovative and pioneering approaches to teaching) to undertake some innovative work to develop pupils' speaking and listening skills. Collectively, this support is helping to improve the quality of teaching and strengthen leadership at all levels. However, it is not yet leading to pupils making faster progress across the curriculum and throughout the school.

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

Yours sincerely

Will Smith  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**