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2 March 2018

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Dear Mr Dawson

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

Following my visit to your school on 15 February 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the monitoring 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 monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school has received two successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

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

The school should take further action to:

- improve pupils' progress and achievement in science
- build on recent improvements in pupils' attendance and the reduction in persistent absence, particularly that of disadvantaged pupils
- improve teaching and learning further so that they are consistently good within and across departments.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, other senior leaders, the director of education and a school improvement partner from the Archdiocese of Liverpool, a representative of the local authority, members of the governing body and pupils. During these meetings, I discussed the actions taken since the last inspection and their impact. Learning walks were undertaken jointly with senior leaders. The school improvement plan and a range of documents relating to school improvement were considered. Documents relating to safeguarding were also scrutinised.

Context

Since the previous inspection, there have been a number of staffing changes. Leaders have appointed a new member of the senior leadership team to lead the achievement and progress of disadvantaged pupils throughout the school. Five members of staff have started at the school, including two new middle leaders. A number of staff have left the school. Reviews of governance and the use of the pupil premium funding have been undertaken.

Main findings

Leaders, governors and staff are committed to improving the experience of all pupils. They are determined to ensure that all pupils at St Mary's benefit from a good quality of education. This passion and belief shines through at all levels, from governors to support staff. Leaders have a realistic view of the school's progress towards becoming good as they are aware that some key areas still require improvement.

Since the previous inspection, leaders and governors have reviewed the school's approach to tracking pupils' progress and have improved behaviour across the school. Leaders have strengthened the quality-assurance procedures across all subjects and key stages to hold leaders and teachers firmly to account for the quality of teaching and learning. Leaders have also introduced a new approach to improving the outcomes and experiences of disadvantaged pupils. Despite the considerable improvements made in many areas of school life, leaders and governors are aware that they need some time now to embed the new systems and procedures and make a positive difference to pupils' outcomes.

Leaders and governors recognise that the school is on a steady journey of improvement. They are adamant that any improvements should be sustainable and show a marked impact on pupils' outcomes and experiences. Some strategies put in place have not had sufficient time to make a noticeable difference in pupils' outcomes. As a consequence, GCSE results in 2017 were still considerably below the national averages for progress in English, mathematics and science. However, the overall progress score for pupils was in line with the national average as pupils

performed particularly well in non-core subjects. The proportion of pupils who achieved a good pass in English and mathematics rose by 3 percentage points to 71%. Some subject areas, such as religious education and modern languages showed considerable improvements in outcomes for pupils.

Leaders and governors are aware of the challenges ahead. Current information presented by leaders shows that current Year 11 pupils are on track to achieve better this year in a range of subjects including English and mathematics. However, progress in science is not improving at a similar rate. Leaders are aware that the progress of pupils in science is not rapid enough to compensate for a legacy of underachievement in this subject. Intensive support, from external consultants and from within the school, is in place to ensure that more pupils are on track to reach their potential in key stage 4.

Following the previous inspection, leaders and governors produced thorough and detailed plans to help bring about improvements in the school. They have acknowledged and acted upon all of the issues identified in the previous inspection. The school improvement plan supports leaders in their actions as it is clear and appropriate. Leaders complete impact statements which inform governors and others how effective leaders' actions are in bringing about improvements.

Since the previous inspection, leaders have taken further actions to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Leaders at all levels work together to ensure high-quality teaching by rigorously checking its quality. All staff consistently use the 'St Mary's lesson', which helps to ensure that pupils get off to a prompt start in their learning. Training on effective questioning is helping to develop this aspect of teaching further, although leaders acknowledge that there is still some way to go to ensure that this is consistent and common practice across the school.

Staff work together to trial teaching and learning initiatives and then share their findings to others, disseminating good practice amongst colleagues. For example, history teachers led a pilot project on 'collective response' with pupils. This was received positively by pupils and staff. As a result, the strategy to encourage pupils to learn together was disseminated to other departments.

Improvements in tracking the progress of pupils are evident through a new system to record the attainment and progress made by pupils. As a result, teachers are now able to use more accurate information to plan teaching to meet pupils' needs. All governors receive clear information about the outcomes of pupils by subject, year group and by different groups of pupils. As a result, they firmly challenge senior and middle leaders about the progress of current pupils.

Behaviour across the school has improved due to the introduction of the school's 'Pride' strategy, which focuses on developing good learning habits and a positive attitude to learning. Leaders have also made changes to internal exclusion as excluded pupils now need to meet with their teacher for a 'repair and rebuild'

meeting. The Catholic ethos of the school permeates every aspect of the pastoral care of pupils. Reconciliation, forgiveness and new beginnings are crucial to leaders' success in this area. As a result of these actions, fixed-term exclusions have fallen by almost half compared to last year, with similar reductions for disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. Pupils speak positively about the 'Pride' system and about the rewards they achieve for sustained positive behaviour for learning. They confirm that behaviour around the school and in lessons has improved. Pupils say that they enjoy their lessons and that in most lessons they feel that they make good progress.

There is clear evidence across the school that pupils enjoy their learning and are ambitious to succeed. All pupils who left the school in 2017 went on to secure a place in either further education, employment or training. Leaders work hard to ensure that pupils receive high-quality careers advice and are guided towards appropriate next steps.

Safeguarding procedures meet requirements. Pupils say that they feel safe in school and are reassured that leaders have recently ensured that the site is secure. Pupils also say that bullying is rare because leaders have taken determined action in this area to ensure pupils' well-being and safety. They say that there is a range of ways in which they can report any concerns they may have and are proud that the whole school now recites the 'anti-bullying pledge' each morning. Pupils say this raises awareness of bullying and reinforces how unacceptable bullying is at St Mary's. School records show that incidents of bullying have declined considerably due to the effective work of the anti-bullying ambassadors and raised awareness in all members of the school community.

The attendance of pupils is improving towards national averages, including for disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities. The proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school is also falling, although leaders recognise that further improvements are still required in this area for a small number of pupils who have complex circumstances. Leaders work tirelessly to involve families and support them in getting their children into school. However, leaders are not afraid to take difficult decisions when parents and carers do not accept the detrimental effect that missing valuable learning has on pupils' life chances and qualifications.

The work done to improve the outcomes of disadvantaged pupils is of high quality. As a result of the enthusiastic and committed leadership of this area, a whole-school approach to improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils is in place. This approach encompasses academic mentoring, personal interviews, bespoke support and clear information for teachers about the needs of individual pupils. In addition, leaders have created the 'Pupil Premium Promise', which ensures that pupils have access to a wide range of activities to broaden their educational and life experiences. All of these strategies are founded on research and are beginning to show positive

improvements in all areas for pupils, from attendance to engagement and achievement. Governors have created a specific committee which oversees the progress of and provision for disadvantaged pupils and are rightly proud of the positive impact of this strategy so far.

Governors have undertaken an external review of governance and are well equipped with both knowledge and skills to support the leadership team and headteacher in making improvements across the school. The chair of governors and chairs of committees understand the key areas of strength of the school and what the school still needs to do to improve further. Governors ask challenging questions of leaders and they scrutinise progress against the school improvement plan to support leaders in their work.

It is clear that all members of the school community are working tirelessly to improve the quality of education for pupils. Leaders are uncompromising in their ambition and in their moral purpose. They are beginning to see the impact of their efforts in many ways. Although nobody is under the illusion that this journey of improvement will be easy, all are committed to its success.

External support

Leaders and governors have secured a wide range of support to ensure that the quality of education continues to improve. Currently, other local schools in the authority and the archdiocese, including the Aspire Trust and St Edmund Arrowsmith Catholic High school, provide support. Middle and senior leaders have also developed strong relationships with a range of other schools through the local archdiocesan cluster.

Leaders benefit from strong support from the local authority and the Archdiocese of Liverpool. Governors and leaders have commissioned reviews of pupil premium spending and governance which have already taken place and their recommendations are now being acted on.

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

Yours sincerely

Helen O'Neill
Her Majesty's Inspector