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14 November 2011

Mr F McCarron
Headteacher
St Damian's RC Science College
Lees Road
Ashton-Under-Lyne
Lancashire
OL6 8BH

Dear Mr McCarron

Special measures: monitoring inspection of St Damian's RC Science College

Following my visit with Andrew Henderson, additional inspector, to your school on 10 and 11 November 2011, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in December 2010. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – good

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good

Newly Qualified Teachers may be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Executive Board of Governors, the Executive Director; Children, Learning and Economic Services for Tameside and the Director of Education for Salford Diocese.

Yours sincerely,

Shirley Gornall
Her Majesty's Inspector

September 2011



Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in December 2010

- Raise attainment, and accelerate progress, particularly in English and mathematics by:
 - increasing the level of challenge in lessons
 - ensuring work in lessons meets all students' needs and especially those who are of middle ability
 - making better use of the good teaching that exists in the college to improve practice more rapidly.

- Strengthen the capacity of leaders to embed and sustain improvements in provision by:
 - reviewing the process of target-setting at whole-college level so that it becomes a more effective tool with which to raise attainment
 - ensuring that managers at all levels rigorously and consistently monitor and evaluate the performance of their teams.

- Improve the effectiveness of engagement with parents and carers.

Special measures: monitoring inspection of St Damian's RC Science College

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 10 and 11 November 2011

Evidence

During the monitoring inspection, inspectors scrutinised a range of documents and examined students' work in lessons; 19 part-lessons were seen and a learning walk was undertaken. One assembly was observed. Meetings were held with the executive headteacher, senior and middle leaders, students, parents and carers, members of the governing body and a representative from the local authority.

Context

Significant changes have occurred since the first monitoring inspection took place. Six teachers have left their posts. The executive headteacher continues to lead the school, supported by an executive board of governors. The deputy headteacher has been appointed as headteacher designate and takes up post in January 2012. An assistant headteacher has been promoted to acting deputy headteacher. An extensive programme of school-to-school support has been maintained through a partnership with St Monica's Catholic High School, Bury. Building work on the school site has been completed.

Students' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

Attainment is rising. In 2011, 57% of students secured five or more GCSE grades A* to C including English and mathematics. This figure was below the school's target but indicates improvement. The proportion of students achieving the highest grades rose significantly in science subjects, reflecting the impact of the school's specialism. Attainment in modern foreign languages was very strong. The proportion of students making expected progress increased and was similar to the national figure in English. Rates of progress continued to be below average, although improving, in mathematics. There was some unevenness in results, with lower performance in technology, geography and religious education, where there had been turbulence in staffing. The progress made by higher and lower ability students was relatively stronger than that of those in the middle ability range. The school's reliable data indicate that performance is set to rise again in 2012 for all groups, across a range of subjects. Greater stability in staffing, raised expectations and improved tracking of students' progress underpin this confidence.

In lessons, students' progress is accelerating because of improvements in the quality and consistency of teaching. Students say that they enjoy their learning more and feel that they receive a good level of challenge in most lessons. Parents and carers report that their children are making good progress and that the school takes action quickly whenever dips in their performance occur. There is a carefully orchestrated intervention plan that ensures that students at risk of underachievement are provided with swift and focused support.

Other relevant student outcomes

Students behave well and show respect for each other. They are smartly dressed, punctual and polite. Most take pride in their work, displaying ambitions for their future and a clear understanding of how these can be realised. Students are respectful of each others' views and collaborate enthusiastically in lessons when required to work with their peers. Their attendance levels have risen and are well above the national average. An increasing number of students make a positive contribution to the school, including through their recent involvement in the process of appointing the headteacher designate. Newly elected senior prefects wear their blue ties with pride and take significant responsibility in the running of the school. Younger students relish the opportunity to be peer mentors, for instance, in technology.

The effectiveness of provision

The profile of teaching has improved and inspection evidence confirmed the school's evaluation of its quality and its impact on students' progress. Most teachers have very good subject knowledge and plan lessons effectively to meet the needs of all students. Lessons include a variety of engaging activities. The quality of teachers' questioning has improved, in response to a programme of training and coaching. Most teachers use a range of questioning styles to ensure that all students are appropriately engaged and challenged. Lessons are generally conducted at a brisk pace that promotes learning for all. There is a consistent expectation that students should make good progress. On occasions, opportunities are missed for students to build upon the contributions made by their peers during discussions. There is also variability in the quality of plenary sessions in consolidating students' learning. Support assistants make a valuable contribution to lessons and promote students' independence. Most assistants are assigned to work in specific departments and this has helped to bring consistency to their work.

The quality of marking has improved. There is some particularly good practice in English, history and science where teachers' comments include a balance of praise and clear advice to students on what they should to improve their work further. Sometimes teachers do not identify errors in spelling and sentence structure and there is inconsistency in how students respond to their teachers' comments.

There have been considerable improvements to the learning environment. Vibrant pictorial images promote a sense of celebration of students' successful involvement in the life of the school. More examples of students' work are displayed in classrooms and teachers make good use of technology in lessons to share good examples of students' work to promote learning.

Adaptations to the school's timetable, including the formation of smaller teaching groups in English and mathematics, enable teachers to provide students to have an increased level of individual support.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- raise attainment, and accelerate progress, particularly in English and mathematics
– good

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The executive headteacher continues to provide strong leadership and, through the development of consistently applied rigorous systems, has built the capacity of other leaders in the school. The headteacher designate works closely with him and has a major role in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the school's management systems. There are detailed plans in place to enable the smooth transition of leadership. The executive headteacher will co-lead the school until April 2012 and will then provide support as a National Leader in Education during the summer term.

Heads of department work in an increasingly consistent way to raise standards in their subjects and have responded very positively to a rigorous process of quality assurance. They have completed searching leadership tasks as a result of which they have a clear understanding of strengths and weaknesses in their departments. Their response to underperformance is generally rapid and assured; they have confidence in the senior leadership team and the robust processes that have been developed. There is a strong, shared sense of accountability, good morale and a more-strategic approach to sharing success. There are still pockets of poor performance in subject leadership and these are being addressed vigorously by the executive headteacher and headteacher designate.

The capacity of heads of year to contribute to the monitoring of students' progress, orchestration of intervention and removal of barriers to achievement has been enhanced by the revision of meeting structures to ensure that they are included in decision making and that their contributions valued. There is a strong inter-relationship between the monitoring of pastoral and academic progress. This is having a positive impact on various groups of students, including those whose circumstances make them vulnerable.

The school has developed a strategic approach to improving teaching through the sharing of good practice. Many teachers, including those who are newly qualified, have taken an active role in demonstrating and discussing their work with colleagues. The leaders responsible for the quality of teaching and learning are excellent role models and the new teaching forum has the enthusiastic support of staff who are keen to take the school to the next stage in its development. The executive governing body continues to provide a high level of support and challenge to the school's leaders. Plans are in place for the appointment of a permanent governing body and a skills audit of governors has been undertaken to inform its organisation.

The school's engagement with parents and carers has been strengthened considerably through the development of the parents' forum, which meets regularly and enables the discussion of a range of issues related to the school. Parents and carers report that

communication channels are good and that any concerns they might have are addressed promptly. The school's newly developed website is popular with parents and carers who welcome the provision of information in an accessible way. Parental feedback has been invited and acted upon with regard to the website's content and organisation. Parents and carers particularly value the targets their children have and the efficiency and consistency with which these are monitored.

Staff, parents and carers and students comment that the ethos of the school has been strengthened. The compassion and care noted during previous inspections have been maintained, but are now complemented with rigour and aspiration.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- strengthen the capacity of leaders to embed and sustain improvements in provision – good
- improve the effectiveness of engagement with parents and carers – good
This issue has now been met.

External support

The package of school-to-school support that includes the local authority and diocese as partners is a model of good practice that has had a discernible impact on the work of leaders, managers and teachers, and is contributing directly to the raising of standards. Newly qualified teachers speak very highly of their induction and mentoring programme, which has enabled them to work with staff from St Monica's Catholic High School as well as those from St Damian's. The relationship between the two schools provides positive benefits for both parties. Strong bonds have been established at various levels enabling ideas to be debated and practical solutions generated.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that weaknesses in students' literacy skills are identified through marking and that there is a consistent means by which students respond to the feedback that teachers provide.
- Provide further opportunities for students to embed their learning by reviewing and building on the ideas of their peers, including during plenary sessions.