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Mrs Joan McCarthy
Headteacher
Saint John Houghton Catholic Voluntary Academy
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Dear Mrs McCarthy

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Saint John Houghton Catholic Voluntary Academy

Following my visit to your school on 12 October 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 March 2017. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

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

The school should take further action to:

- improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that teachers use assessment information to plan activities which meet the needs of pupils, particularly in providing challenge for the most able
- embed strategies to empower middle leaders to take greater responsibility for the provision in their areas
- embed strategies already in place to hold middle leaders to greater account.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you, other senior leaders and members of the local governing body to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I visited seven lessons with senior leaders and discussed the strengths and weaknesses observed. I also visited the Emmaus Centre, an internal provision to support pupils. I met with a group of pupils and spoke to other pupils in their lessons. I evaluated a range of documents, including the school's improvement plans, information about monitoring of the quality of education in the school and the school's single central record. I examined pupils' work in their books to evaluate the quality of learning.

Context

In July 2017, the deputy headteacher left the school and was replaced by the current deputy headteacher in September 2017. Two teaching staff have also left and been replaced. Permanent staff have been appointed to replace long-term supply staff and the school is now fully staffed. The school is part of the Robert Lawrence Trust.

Main findings

Since the last inspection, you have reflected honestly and openly with staff to ensure that your vision is shared and understood by all. You have maintained the strengths evident at the time of the last inspection, particularly with regard to the promotion of pupils' well-being and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. There is a culture of care and pupils feel safe and supported to succeed. The school is highly inclusive, where all are valued. Pupils enjoy being at school and recognise that their teachers want them to do well. They appreciate the opportunities that the school provides. Pupils are keen to meet teachers' expectations of good behaviour and demonstration of positive values.

You have a very clear understanding of the school's weaknesses and the need for rapid and sustained improvement in some key aspects of the school's work. You have communicated high expectations of staff and pupils and you are determined to bring about the necessary improvements. You are very well supported by an effective deputy headteacher who has brought considerable leadership capacity to the team.

Following the inspection in March 2017, you recognised that the leadership of mathematics needed strengthening. You took line-management responsibility of this department and ensured that middle leaders were held to closer account while supporting them to drive improvements in this area. You supported leaders to identify weaknesses in teaching and took the decision to reorganise the pupil grouping arrangements to ensure that all pupils had access to the best possible teaching. You also made sure that staff absences were covered more effectively than in the past by redeploying staff. In your line management of this subject area,

you worked with middle leaders to improve the accuracy of assessment. Alongside this, you ensured that middle leaders monitored pupils' progress more closely, identifying those pupils who were not making enough progress. This enabled you to ensure that appropriate intervention was put in place as quickly as possible. As a result of this considerable work, pupils' progress in mathematics, in 2017, improved significantly and exceeded the national average. The progress of disadvantaged pupils also improved, although it remains below that of all pupils nationally.

You have also taken action to improve provision in science. For example, you have reviewed the curriculum model so that the most able pupils are able to study separate sciences, as part of the usual school day, and ensured that subjects are taught by specialist teachers. Changes to leadership have provided greater accountability. In 2017, pupils made greater progress in science than previously. You are monitoring this area closely to ensure further and sustained improvements.

Pupils made less progress in English in 2017 than in previous years. In 2016, pupils' progress was above the national average. However, in 2017, all pupils, and disadvantaged pupils, made less progress than that made by pupils nationally. You recognise that you have not ensured that leaders have evaluated the reasons for this decline robustly enough. Leaders acknowledge that teachers' predictions were not accurate, and thus appropriate intervention was not implemented. Although departmental action plans are in place, they currently lack the specific detail and rigour required to bring about the necessary improvements. The deputy headteacher has taken responsibility for line management of this area and plans are in place to apply appropriate support and challenge.

In January 2017, you tasked one of your senior leaders with improving the progress of boys. She worked with the teaching, learning and assessment lead to support staff to develop strategies to improve boys' engagement. She has also led developments in activities to raise boys' aspirations, to increase staff expectations of what they can achieve and to celebrate their achievements. At the time of the last inspection, the impact of this work had yet to come to fruition, but in 2017, boys' progress was faster than in previous years.

Since September, you have implemented more rigorous line-management procedures. The appointment of the deputy headteacher has enabled you to re-allocate roles and responsibilities within the leadership team. This has provided additional capacity for improvement throughout the school. You have raised expectations of middle leaders, for example by holding examination review meetings with them to evaluate pupils' outcomes and identify areas in need of improvement. You now hold middle leaders to greater account and they are taking greater responsibility for improving the quality of provision in their areas as a result. This remains a priority.

The deputy headteacher has introduced more robust systems to monitor and evaluate the work of the school, particularly in regard to teaching, learning and

assessment. He has implemented a calendar of monitoring activities to ensure a whole-school, strategic approach. This has contributed to improvements to the quality of teaching, learning and assessment throughout the school. In addition, the teaching, learning and assessment lead has shared clear expectations of teaching staff, provided training and produced a guide to support staff to improve their practice. He has worked with middle leaders to evaluate the quality of provision in their areas, to identify areas in need of improvements and to set targets for improvement. These targets inform future training needs, the impact of which is evaluated as part of the whole-school monitoring calendar. Leaders have also developed strategies to share the good practice in the school, for example through whole-school training events. To further improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, you have identified the need to ensure that the most able pupils are provided with sufficient challenge to support them to access the higher grades. This rightly remains a priority.

You have identified the need to provide support for pupils who find it difficult to access the mainstream curriculum or to maintain the appropriate behaviour necessary to remain in lessons. The week before the last inspection, you opened the Emmaus Centre. This is staffed by full-time specialists who work closely with individual pupils who are struggling to succeed in their usual lessons. The centre provides bespoke support, such as in anger management, as well as subject-specific support. This provision has been of particular value to disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Pupils told me that they recognise the benefit of the Emmaus Centre. The number of exclusions has reduced significantly and is now below the national average. Pupils understand the importance of attending regularly; for example, they are able to explain the link between increased levels of absence and lower GCSE grades. Attendance for all groups of pupils has improved but remains below national averages for disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Governors are committed to the school. They are very clear about their roles and responsibilities and have a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Governors have the skills, knowledge and understanding to hold leaders to account and take decisive action to challenge and support as appropriate.

External support

The trust has provided support through the commissioning of an effective school improvement partner who has supported leaders in evaluating the impact of their work. The diocese has also commissioned support from a school leader of science. In addition, the diocese and school leaders have sought support from another school's leader of mathematics.

The last inspection recommended that the school commission a review of the use of the pupil premium. This took some time to arrange because you were keen to

ensure that it was undertaken by a reviewer of high calibre. The review, which took place in September 2017, provided a detailed and thorough analysis of the school's work. It made a series of recommendations which are pertinent to the school's needs. You have taken action to address these recommendations. For example, each department has incorporated a target related to disadvantaged pupils' progress into their action planning. In addition, all teachers are now aware of eligible pupils and identify them in their lesson planning. It is not yet clear how this information is used to meet the needs of this group of pupils and you recognise that this needs further work.

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

Yours sincerely

Deborah Mosley

Her Majesty's Inspector