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08 Apr 2011

Mr K Higgins
Headteacher
St John Fisher Catholic High School
Oxford Road
Dewsbury
West Yorkshire
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Dear Mr Higgins,

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools: monitoring inspection of St John Fisher Catholic High School

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when Mary Liptrot, additional inspector and I inspected your school on 7 Apr 2011, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during the inspection. Please pass on our thanks to the students who gave up their time at lunch time to talk with us and to the representative of the local authority for speaking to me on the phone.

Since the last inspection, a number of changes have been made to staffing and leadership. A new head of the English faculty took up post on 1 September 2010, and a new second in charge of the faculty joined the school in January. A further new appointment with a responsibility for raising standards through the use of assessment for learning was also made in September, leading to a substantially changed English faculty. In mathematics, there have been some difficulties in recruiting new staff and the faculty currently has two long-term supply teachers. Internal reorganisation and the return of a member of staff from maternity leave, however, now mean that the faculty has stable leadership again. The school has invested in a range of support to both faculties including subject mentors. The senior leadership team has also been strengthened with the appointment of two new assistant headteachers.

As a result of the inspection on 27 and 29 January 2010, the school was asked to address the most important areas for improvement which are set out in the annex to this letter.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school has made satisfactory progress in making improvements and good progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.

The attainment of students at the end of Year 11 improved in a number of key areas in 2010. The percentages of the year group who obtained A*-C grades in English, in mathematics and in five subjects all increased and were the best they have been in the last three years. The proportion of students who achieved five A*-C grades including English and

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mathematics, rose from 38% in 2009 to 53% in 2010. The percentage of students making three levels of progress from Key Stage 2 to the end of Year 11 also increased significantly in both English and mathematics. The contextualised value added scores overall and for these two subjects, however, did not improve in 2010 compared to the previous year which reflects the slightly higher prior attainment for this year group.

A good deal of work has taken place in the last two years in both English and mathematics, to raise attainment by the end of Year 11. The school's investment in training in the use of assessment to support learning is beginning to show impact in lesson planning and delivery. Staff have invested a great deal of time and energy into targeted support and additional tuition, in small groups and one-to-one. This, together with an improved quality of teaching observed by inspectors in English, have enabled students to see and appreciate the increased priority accorded to English and mathematics. One student, when asked how the school could be improved said, 'Put the same effort into other subjects as they are doing into English and maths.' Leaders and managers in both faculties are now beginning to focus their attention away from the immediate issues of raising attainment in Year 11, into more sustainable, long-term improvements such as new schemes of work and improved approaches to teaching in Key Stage 3. The school's projections for examination outcomes in 2011 indicate further improvements are likely.

Following the appointment of a data manager this time last year, significant improvements have been made in the ways in which the school monitors the progress of students. In Year 11 and the sixth-form, regular assessment and good record keeping mean that the pinpointing of underachievement in the examination years is rigorous. It is also now focused on improving grades at all levels, not just the C/D borderline. Intervention strategies are sharply targeted and in some cases quite radical in Year 11, although much less well developed in other years in the main school. At sixth-form level, similar systems have been introduced from September 2010, and are showing some evidence of impact. Students are aware now that if they fall behind it will be quickly spotted, and action will be taken by the school. In some subjects, there are weekly tests to monitor understanding and progress. Students across the school are increasingly aware of their current attainment and their targets. Many can articulate clearly what they need to do to improve. Leaders and managers show growing confidence in the use of data, but this has not yet been fully embedded in the work of every teacher.

Achievement in the sixth form in 2010 has shown a slight increase in average points per entry in each of the last three years. The number of points per candidate remains slightly above the national average. Performance at AS level in 2010 was stronger than at A2 whilst in both qualifications there remains some significant variation between subjects. Some changes in the teachers delivering A level courses have brought about improvements in learning, but there is a lack of a consistent approach to post-16 teaching strategies across faculties. Similarly, there is not a coherent, whole-school approach to the development of independent learning skills in sixth form students. As a result, some students report that they are over-supported in some subjects whilst others believe they are expected to do too much on their own. Observation of sixth form lessons supported this view.

Following the last inspection, the school's actions to bring about improvement have been decisive and substantial. Whilst much of the impact of the investment has yet to show, the systems and the people are now in place to create and sustain improvement. The very recent departmental reviews of English and mathematics are incisive and useful and demonstrate a far more effective approach than was the case. Formerly, improvement planning and self-evaluation was overly descriptive and lacked evaluation of impact. The school's specialist status in sport and information and communication technology studies continues to provide a positive ethos and support to wider achievement.

The local authority has provided high quality support to the school over the last year, including a key contribution to the departmental reviews. Further support has been obtained through links with a Gaining Ground partner school and professional development from a local Leading Edge school. This has been appreciated by staff at all levels and shows impact in teaching and learning, and in leadership and management.

I hope that you have found the inspection helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Mr John Peckham
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place

Key issue 1: Raise standards in English and mathematics by ensuring that:

- Students in all year groups make at least their expected progress
- Teaching and assessment in mathematics is consistently good.

Key Issue 2: Analyse assessment data and evaluate progress more rigorously so that:

- Underachievement is identified early and action taken promptly
- Students in the main school and the sixth form make faster progress towards their targets.

Key issue 3: Improve results in the sixth form by making sure that, in all subjects, students make at least average or better progress.