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Miss Elaine Heaphy  
Headteacher  
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Dear Miss Heaphy

### **Short inspection of St Mark's West Essex Catholic School**

Following my visit to the school on 5 October 2017 with Jane Ladner, Ofsted Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in July 2013.

#### **This school continues to be good.**

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection.

You and your senior colleagues have led the school with determination, integrity and a clear sense of moral purpose. You have worked steadfastly towards fulfilling the school's stated mission statement: 'Each person is recognised as an individual, valued and enabled to fulfil her or his potential to the highest possible standard.' The effectiveness of leadership at the school is recognised by a large majority of pupils, staff and parents alike.

You have helped to shape a highly inclusive school, where there are high expectations of what all pupils can achieve regardless of their background, race or religion. You welcome pupils who have not found it is easy to settle into other schools and those who may have recently arrived in the country. Almost all pupils, including those who are disadvantaged and the most vulnerable, make good progress and move successfully to the next stage of their education or employment.

School leaders have successfully prioritised the welfare and personal development of pupils. All pupils receive very strong levels of support, guidance and care and they feel highly valued as a result. Pupils are very proud of their school and clearly enjoy it. They attend regularly and behave exceptionally well. They are polite and courteous to adults and each other. They move around the site in a calm and orderly way and look after their facilities carefully.

Teaching continues to be effective. There is a purposeful, productive and industrious atmosphere in all lessons. Pupils work diligently and with enthusiasm. Teachers consistently create and sustain constructive, trusting relationships. One pupil reflected: 'It is the people who really make St Mark's such a great place!' Pupils are happy to contribute to lessons and they ask and answer questions articulately. They are not afraid of being wrong. The school's curriculum is broad and balanced. School leaders continuously evaluate it to ensure that it represents an extremely wide range of experiences for pupils and enhances their social, moral, cultural and spiritual education.

The school is not complacent. You understand that there is more to be done for it to become outstanding. The school's self-evaluation is thorough and perceptive and school leaders ensure that detailed plans are quickly put in place to secure any necessary improvements when areas for development are identified. For example, senior leaders acted with due urgency when the 2016 key stage 5 results were disappointing and the plans you have put in place are now starting to have a demonstrable impact. You have enhanced the opportunities that teachers have to share effective practice so that over time all teaching can be as good as the best and the remaining inconsistencies in the performance of different subject departments can be eliminated.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

Leaders, including governors, have ensured that there is a culture of safeguarding within the school. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. Pupils speak with confidence about the ways in which the school makes them feel safe. Pupils know where to go if they have a concern and are positive that staff will support them effectively.

The curriculum helps them to understand and manage risks, such as those involving the use of the internet and social networking sites, and pupils are clear that the advice they receive does help to shape their behaviour. Pupils are confident that poor behaviour, including bullying, is rare and dealt with effectively if it does occur. Pastoral leaders monitor and support pupils' well-being effectively.

Staff are quick in identifying and following up any concerns that they have about individuals. They work effectively with external agencies so that pupils get the help that they need swiftly. Information shared with parents and carers on these occasions is regular and clear, and working relationships with other agencies to keep children safe are effective. The school also liaises well with parents when pupils face time away from school, for example because they are ill for an extended period.

## Inspection findings

- My first line of enquiry was to investigate how the school is working to ensure that all groups of pupils make really strong progress. For example, those pupils who join the school with attainment which is above the national average, although they still make sound progress, do not make as much progress as those with lower starting points. The school acknowledges that this is the key group it needs to improve if overall progress within the school is to strengthen to be well above the national average.
- The school has adopted a range of strategies to accelerate further the progress of their most able pupils. These include a 'high achievers' extra-curricular programme, where pupils are encouraged to explore in depth how knowledge and understanding from school subjects can be applied in the wider world. The attendance of relevant pupils at these events is strong.
- School leaders acknowledge that there is still room for the school to sharpen further its provision for high-prior-attaining pupils. Teachers do know who the most able pupils in their classes are. However, they do not routinely convert this knowledge into concrete strategies for incorporating sufficient challenge into lessons from the outset. As a result, the most able pupils do not make the same accelerated progress as their low-prior-attaining peers.
- Boys at St Mark's make solid progress, but they still made notably less progress than girls at key stage 4 in both 2016 and 2017. School leaders have adopted a number of approaches to address this issue. They have established literacy programmes specifically to reduce rapidly any deficits that boys have on entry to the school. They have focused on enhancing boys' extended writing across the whole curriculum. As a result, the school's own assessment information shows that this gender gap is closing for pupils currently in the school.
- I was also interested to explore the performance of disadvantaged pupils at the school, and to investigate how far school leaders understand which strategies are having the most impact on the success of this pupil group. Disadvantaged pupils at St Mark's routinely make progress in line with that made by non-disadvantaged pupils nationally. In 2016, they made strongly positive progress which even exceeded that made by the school's other pupils.
- School leaders do closely evaluate the strategies they use to support these disadvantaged pupils. Their detailed analysis suggests that they make strong progress because of the highly individualised programme that is put in place for each disadvantaged pupil. School leaders analyse the individual barriers that could hold each pupil back, and share personalised strategies with their teachers to overcome them.
- However, the school does not share this evaluation through the school website as thoroughly as it should. As a result, parents and other schools who are interested in the success of this provision do not have access to sufficient useful information. School leaders acknowledge that they need to establish more reliable systems for updating and monitoring the information communicated through the school website.

- A further line of enquiry was to investigate how successfully the school is working to eliminate the remaining inconsistencies in the quality of teaching in different subject departments. The teaching in some departments is clearly exceptionally strong and has resulted in outcomes which represent consistently high progress over time. For example, inspectors observed teaching in modern foreign languages and design and technology which combined very high expectations and meticulous planning to promote powerful learning.
- The school has adopted a range of strategies to increase the amount of outstanding teaching within the school by sharing this highly effective practice. The school's professional development programme is tailored to help improve the skills of individual teachers. Performance management systems are used effectively to challenge staff and hold them to account for pupils' progress.
- At key stage 4 in 2016 and 2017, mathematics outcomes were not as strong as those in English. Teaching in English is now particularly effective. New leadership in the mathematics department is being well supported and teaching is strengthening rapidly.
- School leaders establish and communicate very high expectations about how pupils maintain a written record of their learning in their exercise books. As a result, pupils' work is routinely neatly presented and coherently organised. This is helping to enhance the consistency of learning across subjects.
- My final focus for this inspection was to investigate how the school responded to disappointing key stage 5 results in 2016. The progress made by students in 2016 was well below the national average; this represented a sharp decline from the preceding years where outcomes had been positive.
- The school acted decisively following these results. The leadership of the sixth form was restructured so key issues such as student punctuality could be monitored meticulously. A more detailed programme of quality assurance focusing on the quality of sixth-form teaching was put in place. School leaders' evaluations suggested that it was the students joining the sixth form with the lowest starting points who had made the weakest progress; a new induction programme was established to ensure that these pupils started to develop key study skills from the outset. The student prefect team was relaunched.
- In 2017, key stage 5 attainment improved. The school's own performance information shows that students currently in the sixth form are now making the progress they should. Evidence from this inspection supports the contention that sixth-form teaching is improving and outcomes are strengthening as a result.
- Sixth-form leaders acknowledge that the non-qualification elements of the sixth-form study programmes, including work-related learning and opportunities for work experience, are not as thorough as they should be.

## **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they strengthen further the school's provision for the most able pupils, particularly by ensuring that teachers routinely deploy effective classroom strategies which challenge them in lessons
- they continue to enhance sixth-form provision, both in order to accelerate academic progress further and to ensure that the non-qualification elements of the sixth-form study programmes are strengthened
- they sharpen systems for monitoring and improving the quality of communication provided through the school's website, including providing a more detailed evaluation of the school's provision for disadvantaged pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Paul Lawrence  
**Ofsted Inspector**

## **Information about the inspection**

Inspectors held meetings with you, other school leaders, teachers, governors, and various groups of pupils. I had a telephone discussion with a representative from the local authority. We observed pupils' learning in a series of short visits to a number of lessons, and all of these visits were conducted jointly with members of the school's leadership team. We scrutinised a range of school documentation including: policies; the minutes of governors' meetings; the school's self-evaluation; the school's improvement plan; safeguarding records; and information about pupils' achievement, behaviour and attendance. We considered the views expressed in 55 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, including 53 free-text responses, together with 166 questionnaires returned by pupils and 30 returned by school staff.