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Mr Chris Horrocks
Executive Principal
St Edmund Arrowsmith Catholic Centre for Learning (VA)
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Dear Mr Horrocks

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of St Edmund Arrowsmith Catholic Centre for Learning (VA)

Following my visit with Timothy Gartside, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 19 and 20 June 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and inspection findings. Thank you for the help that you gave during the inspection and for the time that you made available to discuss the actions that you have taken since the school's most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in May 2017. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During this inspection, inspectors observed the school's work and scrutinised documents. They met with the executive principal; senior and middle leaders; two groups of pupils; a group of teachers; the chair and vice-chair of the governing body; a representative of the Archdiocese of Liverpool; and a representative from the local authority. They observed teaching and learning across a range of subjects. They also observed how pupils behaved around the school and talked to them informally.

Context

In June 2017, you became executive principal of the school until the end of this academic year. A substantive headteacher was appointed in February 2018. Although she will not take up her post until September 2018, she has been meeting regularly with you and senior leaders since Easter to plan for the next academic year. The senior leadership team now comprises four assistant headteachers. A new governing body was constituted in September 2017. A new staffing structure takes effect from September 2018.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

There is no doubt that leaders have taken a range of actions to bring about improvements since the last inspection. However, at the time of this monitoring inspection, these actions have not had a significant impact on the two key areas of pupils' progress and attendance rates. The rate of improvement has not been quick enough. However, it is clear that the school is in a better position now than it was a year ago.

During your time as executive principal, you have empowered new senior leaders to lead their respective areas well. Staff and pupils value the empathetic leadership that you have brought to the school over the last 12 months. Staff are now eager for a period of stability and long-term commitment that they hope will come with the arrival of the new headteacher in September.

You have taken action to resolve the challenging financial situation that the school was in. The work that you have done on this and the related staffing restructure has cleared the way for the new headteacher to be able to give her full attention to the quality of teaching and learning from September. You have also secured the funding to make changes to the layout of the building to improve the learning environment for pupils.

You acted swiftly and decisively to improve the quality of governance. Rather than delay proceedings with an external review of governance, you took the decision to reconstitute the governing body in September 2017. The new chair of the governing body has brought a wealth of experience to the school. Under his dynamic leadership, the new governing body is now providing effective support and challenge to senior and middle leaders.

Following the last inspection, an executive management board (EMB) was formed to monitor closely the actions that leaders are taking towards the removal of the serious weakness designation. The EMB comprises representatives from the local authority, the archdiocese and the chair and vice-chair of the local governing body. It is clear from the minutes of the meetings that they are challenging leaders on the effectiveness of their actions. Members of the EMB are very aware that the rate of improvement has not been quick enough.

Leadership of personal development, behaviour and welfare is strong. There is a very clear vision and philosophy underpinning all the work in this area. Improved systems for managing pupils' behaviour have contributed to the reduction in fixed-term exclusions. However, leaders know that much more remains to be done as the fixed-term exclusion rate is still significantly higher than the national average.

There is no doubting the efforts that leaders have put in to improve pupils' attendance over the last 12 months. The overarching focus has been to change the prevailing culture in relation to the importance of attending school. Actions taken include: telephone calls, texts and letters to parents; home visits; attendance panels; and rewards for good attendance. While leaders believe that they have begun to change the culture, they are disappointed that there has only been limited impact on actual absence rates. The current overall absence rate remains significantly above the national average. The persistent absence rate has reduced but it is still twice the national average. Of particular concern is that far too many disadvantaged pupils, and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, still do not attend school regularly.

Leaders' actions have had very limited impact on pupils' progress. The school's assessment information indicates that outcomes for the current Year 11 will be only marginally better than in 2016. This means that, for the third year running, the school will not meet the government's current floor standards. This information shows that, as in the previous two years, the most able pupils and boys have made particularly poor progress from Year 7 to Year 11.

Of particular concern is the very poor progress that disadvantaged pupils make during their time at St Edmund Arrowsmith. Assessment information indicates that the achievement of disadvantaged pupils in the current Year 11 will, once again, be well below that of other pupils nationally. It is clear that leaders do not systematically monitor and evaluate how they spend the considerable amount of pupil premium funding that comes into the school. Currently, this funding is not helping disadvantaged pupils to achieve their potential.

There is a lack of convincing evidence that pupils' progress is being tracked effectively across the school. In addition, leaders do not systematically interrogate the information that they gather to inform the actions that they take. The most recent key stage 4 assessment information shows that pupils are making inconsistent progress across different subjects. The picture in key stage 3 is better, with more pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, on track to achieve their target grades across a range of subjects.

Leaders have taken action to improve the quality of teaching. This includes more frequent professional development sessions for all staff and more personalised support to help individual teachers to improve their practice. However, leaders know that these initiatives have not had an impact on classroom practice across the school. The quality of teaching remains too variable both within and between

departments. As was the case at the last inspection, some teachers do not have high enough expectations of their pupils. Teachers do not provide their pupils with enough challenge to enable them to make the best possible progress. Despite leaders' actions, teaching in mathematics and science is not strong. This is having a negative impact on the progress that pupils make in these subjects.

The variability in the quality of teaching is related to weaknesses in subject leadership that still exist in the school. Some departments are led effectively, such as English, art and modern foreign languages. However, in other areas subject leaders are not having an impact on improving teaching and standards in their departments. Senior leaders and governors have raised their expectations of middle leaders; for example, in terms of their self-evaluation and action-planning. However, you recognise that more work is required to develop the skills and capacity of subject leaders.

It is clear from this inspection that effective leadership does exist in the school. This, coupled with the advent of the new headteacher, who has a proven track record of strong leadership, means that the school is poised to increase the rate of improvement. However, at the time of this first monitoring inspection, the school is not as far on its journey of improvement as it should be.

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are not taking effective action towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

The local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

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 Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Anne Seneviratne
Her Majesty's Inspector