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Mr Simon Eccles
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Eccles

Short inspection of St Mary's Catholic Academy

Following my visit to the school on 21 March 2017 with Timothy Gartside, 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 your predecessor school was judged to be good in November 2011.

This school continues to be good.

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

St Mary's lives up to its aim to be a 'caring faith community' and this ethos pervades the school. Pupils spoken to during the inspection showed great pride in their school and parents wholeheartedly appreciate the efforts made by staff. Comments from parents such as 'The staff go above and beyond what is expected' and 'The staff clearly have the best interests of the children at heart' were typical. The overwhelming majority of parents who responded to the Ofsted online questionnaire, Parent View, would recommend St Mary's to other parents. Staff were equally positive; their comments portray a school where people are valued and supported. One member of staff put this very clearly: 'Each and every pupil knows there are people in school who care deeply for them...who will go the extra mile for them...that is something of which I am incredibly proud.'

At the inspection of your predecessor school, inspectors identified many strengths, such as the quality of learning for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Inspectors also found that pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development was outstanding. It was pleasing to note during this inspection that high standards in both of these areas have been maintained.

The inspection report also indicated that improvements were required in mathematics. School leaders have been successful in tackling weaknesses in mathematics and this subject is rapidly becoming one of the strengths of the school. Many pupils we spoke to said that mathematics is well taught and that they would like to continue to study this subject in the sixth form.

At the inspection of your predecessor school, it was recommended that you improve the use of assessment so that teaching addresses the needs of learners more effectively. To tackle this, you have developed an innovative approach to teaching that uses assessment information highly productively to shape what teachers teach and pupils learn. You call this approach 'DAFITAL' and all members of the school community, including those responsible for governance, are well versed in how this operates. Pupils spoken to during the inspection said that they appreciate the regular checks on their progress and the information that they receive on how to improve.

Safeguarding is effective.

The overwhelming majority of pupils who completed the Ofsted questionnaire indicated that they feel safe in school, and this view is echoed by most parents. The school has a strong culture of safeguarding and relevant procedures are followed meticulously. School leaders are keen to make pupils aware of risks that exist in the world outside, including in the local community, helping to keep pupils safe beyond the school gates. Pupils appreciate the opportunity they have to talk through their problems with the school chaplain and they also spoke highly of a play they had seen called 'Chelsea's choice', which explored the dangers of child sexual exploitation.

Inspection findings

During this short inspection, inspectors focused on a number of lines of enquiry arising from analysis of information about the school available to inspectors prior to the inspection.

- The first line of enquiry explored how well the most able pupils, including those that are disadvantaged, achieve in their studies. Pupils of lower and middle ability achieve well in your school, but this has not always been the case for the most able; in 2016, overall, most-able pupils underachieved in their public examinations.
- You have a very accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses and had identified the progress of the most able as a key priority. You and your leadership team have put together a comprehensive action plan to sort this out. Improvement in outcomes for most-able pupils is a focus for all departments and teachers are held rigorously to account for their progress. During the inspection, we examined most-able pupils' work in a number of subjects, observed their learning in lessons and discussed with senior leaders current data on their progress. This evidence supports your view that this group of pupils is now

making better progress. You are not complacent and are determined that this trend of improvement is sustained.

- The second key line of enquiry was focused on underperforming subjects. As mentioned earlier, the drive to improve mathematics has been largely successful. You have tackled poor leadership and weak teaching in modern foreign languages and outcomes in this subject area now look much more positive. Pupils have noticed improvements and as a result there has been much greater take-up of French by Year 9 pupils selecting their options for key stage 4.
- During the inspection, we discussed science, as, on the surface, achievement does not look strong in this subject overall. You firmly believe that all pupils, whatever their ability, should be given the opportunity to study the separate sciences to GCSE level. This policy is not common in secondary schools nationally and lower-ability pupils are often encouraged to pursue science courses that may be considered to be more accessible. It is clear from the school's data, lesson observations and lower-ability pupils' work that these pupils are making good progress from their starting points by following this course of study. Although this does not always result in them achieving what is regarded as a 'good' grade at GCSE in these subjects, they are undeniably receiving teaching of high quality and making gains in their learning. You agreed with inspectors the importance of ensuring that courses followed by pupils should always meet their needs and abilities, as well as preparing them well for the next stages of their lives.
- The third line of enquiry examined your curriculum, as a far lower proportion of your pupils than is seen nationally gain the English Baccalaureate qualification. This qualification is achieved when pupils successfully complete courses in English, mathematics, science, a foreign language and humanities at GCSE. Inspectors were concerned that pupils, particularly the most able pupils, may not be following courses that would enable them to apply to prestigious universities in the future. We found that, contrary to our initial concerns, pupils have ample opportunity to select an appropriate range of qualifications and do so. In the past, French and Spanish were not popular options and this had a negative impact on the proportion of pupils achieving the English Baccalaureate. This is no longer the case.
- Inspectors were also concerned that some subjects in the sixth form had very small numbers. You acknowledged that you have to constantly review post-16 provision to ensure that courses are viable. However, you also pointed out that the number of students in the sixth form is steadily growing, despite considerable competition from other providers. This reflects the confidence that pupils have in the education they receive in your school and it is undeniable that outcomes for students in the sixth form have improved year on year.
- The final line of enquiry related to attendance. Although most pupils attend school regularly, disadvantaged pupils are more frequently absent than their peers. This difference is diminishing because you have taken swift and determined action to make sure that all pupils are aware of the importance of regular attendance at school.
- A more difficult problem to address has been the rate of persistent absenteeism for disadvantaged pupils, which is significantly higher than the national average

for other pupils. You have used pupil premium funding wisely in a range of initiatives to ensure that pupils attend school on a regular basis. The rate of persistent absenteeism is on the decline, but you are aware that this is still a major priority for further improvement.

- The school's partnership with the primary schools in the trust has proved most productive. A creative approach to planning the curriculum has raised expectations, particularly at secondary level, of what pupils can achieve. Trustees bring a wide range of experience and expertise to their role in governance. They are very knowledgeable about the strengths and weaknesses of the school and are effective in holding school leaders to account.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- strategies to teach the most able pupils, including those that are disadvantaged, are reviewed continuously to ensure that improvements so far are sustained and that these pupils achieve their potential
- strategies are explored to reduce persistent absenteeism further so that it is at least in line with the national average
- all trustees have had training in the 'Prevent' strategy
- vigilance around the curriculum is maintained in all key stages to ensure that it meets the needs, abilities and aspirations of all pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Joan Bonenfant
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we met with you, the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, senior leaders and members of the executive board of trustees. I also had a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority. Inspectors met with groups of pupils, both formally and informally. We considered the 49 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, and 40 submissions to the free text survey. In addition, we also considered the responses of pupils and members of staff to their respective surveys. We visited a number of classrooms and scrutinised pupils' books in a range of subjects.

Inspectors examined a wide range of documentation provided by the school, including the following: the school's self-evaluation of its work; information on attendance; information on pupils' current progress; minutes of meetings of the trustees; the school development plan; analysis of the impact of expenditure of the pupil premium; records relating to behaviour and information on safeguarding.

The school meets requirements on the publication of specified information on its website.