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Mr Ivan Gaughan
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Dear Mr Ivan Gaughan

Short inspection of Holy Cross Catholic High School, A Sports and Science College

Following my visit to the school on 24 October 2017 with Barbara Dutton, 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 February 2014.

This school continues to be good.

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

You know the school well. Therefore, your self-evaluation of the school is detailed and accurate. Your plans to address the few areas that need to improve are appropriate and understood by all, including subject leaders and governors. As a result, since your appointment as headteacher, you have maintained the school's strengths and led improvement in its few areas of weakness.

All staff who responded to Ofsted's survey said that they were proud to be a member of the school. You have clear and high expectations of your staff and are considerate of their professional development and well-being. This ethos is a strength of the school. It has supported the school's improvement since the last inspection and reflects the positive relationships and focus on care that staff have with pupils. Pupils behave well in school and their overall attendance figure has been better than the national average in recent years.

Most pupils have good outcomes across a broad range of subjects. In 2016, the progress that Year 11 pupils made in their GCSE examinations across most subjects was in line with others nationally, including in English and mathematics. Provisional results for 2017 indicate that this positive trend has continued. At the last inspection, school leaders were charged with improving the teaching and outcomes

of disadvantaged pupils. Accordingly, leaders have a sharp focus on these pupils and this has resulted in their improved progress, which was broadly in line with others nationally in 2016 but dipped for some disadvantaged pupils in 2017. Consequently, school leaders accurately identify this as an area that they can continue to improve.

Teaching is strong in most subjects, including English and mathematics. Teachers have good subject knowledge and pupils respond positively to the work that they are set. Teachers regularly assess pupils' knowledge and understanding, so they are clear on how they can improve. However, some weaker teaching remains, particularly where pupils are not routinely set challenging enough work. Sometimes these are pupils with high starting points, including some of those in Year 7.

All staff and almost all parents who responded to Ofsted's surveys at the time of the inspection said that the school is well led and managed. Consequently, the school is regarded highly by its community and the number of pupils joining the school has increased significantly in recent years.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leadership of this area is strong. You have secured a culture of vigilance in staff and pupils, so they are aware of risks and know how to remain safe. Staff are regularly updated about safeguarding issues, including from external agencies to provide additional expertise. For example, the Amy Winehouse Foundation has provided support to prevent drug misuse and Lancashire Constabulary have led training to ensure that the identification of children at risk of sexual exploitation is rapid and effective. Procedures to recruit staff safely are established. Safeguarding records are detailed and are well maintained.

All pupils who we spoke to during the inspection said that they feel safe in school. They said that bullying, including racist and homophobic bullying, is rare and that staff deal effectively with any incidents. They describe the school as safe and inclusive. Pupils benefit from regular teaching on how to stay healthy and safe. For example, pupils understand how to keep themselves safe from potential dangers that can arise when using the internet.

You ensure that the small number of pupils who follow an alternative provision curriculum are monitored routinely, so they are kept safe when they are studying elsewhere. Leaders have effective systems and procedures in place to follow up on any pupils who are absent from school, including those who are regularly absent from school. All staff who responded to the staff questionnaire said that pupils are safe in school, as did almost all parents who responded to Parent View.

Inspection findings

- The first area that we considered during the inspection was the effectiveness of leaders' plans in helping disadvantaged pupils to make good progress. School leaders, including governors, have a sharp focus on improving the regular

attendance and outcomes of disadvantaged pupils. Accordingly, in 2016, the progress that disadvantaged pupils in Year 11 made in their GCSE examinations was in line with that of others nationally. Although there was a dip in GCSE outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in 2017 overall, upon further investigation inspectors found that this was principally because a small group of these pupils were studying bespoke vocational courses alongside English, mathematics and science rather than other traditional subjects. These courses helped these pupils move on to post-16 education successfully but partly explain the lower outcomes for this group. The progress that disadvantaged pupils are making currently is accelerating and differences in rates of progress between them and others nationally are diminishing. However, school leaders do not routinely monitor and evaluate the impact of their actions and this sometimes slows the improvement. Although many disadvantaged pupils attend well, the regular attendance of a minority of disadvantaged pupils remains a concern.

- The second focus area was the effectiveness of your subject leadership team to ensure that teachers assess pupils' learning effectively and routinely set work that challenges them, so that they make strong progress. The leaders who spoke to inspectors described their work in monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of teaching in the subjects that they manage and how it fits in with school expectations. Subject management systems are applied more consistently than previously and, because of this, teaching has improved. Accordingly, teachers plan and use assessment effectively and this has led to pupils learning at a faster rate. More teachers set work that challenges pupils sufficiently and, because of this, Year 11 pupils with low, mid and high starting points have made progress in line with others nationally in their GCSE examinations across a range of subjects, including English and mathematics. However, a few inconsistencies remain within and across subjects where some pupils are not set hard enough work, including those who are most able and those starting Year 7.
- The third area we looked at was the quality of education provided for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. This is a growing strength of the school. These pupils benefit from well-trained and highly motivated leaders and staff who manage their pastoral and academic support at a personalised level. Staff communicate with parents and other agencies effectively, so plans to support pupils are reviewed regularly. Consequently, the progress that pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make from their starting points is improving and it is regularly strong. For example, in the current Year 11, these pupils are working broadly in line with their target grades across a broad range of subjects, including English and mathematics. Systems to monitor and assess the outcomes of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities across other year groups are not well embedded so leaders are less clear on the progress of these cohorts of pupils. However, when inspectors looked at case studies, it was clear that leaders knew these pupils well. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities have suffered from low attendance previously. This has improved recently, but it does not yet match that of others nationally.
- The fourth focus area was the effectiveness of governance. Governors are clear where the school is doing well and where there is need for improvement. The

school has experienced a budget deficit in recent years. Following a skills audit, governors have been recruited with expertise in finance and education and additional support has been sought from external organisations. Consequently, governors have developed a budget recovery plan while also sustaining improvements in the standard of pupils' education at the school. Governance systems and practice are challenging, transparent and effective.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the good practice of monitoring and evaluating actions is further embedded, so that improvements are more rapid and consistent
- teachers routinely set pupils, including the most able, challenging work from the start of Year 7
- they build on actions that are improving the outcomes and attendance of disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

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 Lancashire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Ruddy
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, you and your senior team visited lessons with the inspection team. We looked at the work in pupils' books and spoke with pupils about their experience of lessons, behaviour and safety. Inspectors held meetings with pupils, middle leaders and governors and spoke with a representative from the Archdiocese of Liverpool. We looked at a wide range of documentation, including the school's own self-evaluation, development plan, attendance and behaviour records, pupil premium plan and safeguarding records. We considered the views of the 90 parents, 44 members of staff and 371 pupils who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaires.