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Mr Paul Shannon
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Dear Mr Shannon

Short inspection of St Mary's RC High School

Following my visit to the school on 11 January 2018 with Huw Bishop, 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 December 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Based on the evidence available during this short inspection, I am of the opinion that the school has demonstrated strong practice in certain areas. This may indicate that the school is improving towards being outstanding. Therefore, I am recommending that the school's next inspection be a section 5 inspection.

You, your staff and the school's governors have helped pupils make marked improvements in their learning. Over the past four years, most pupils have made much better progress in their GCSEs than other pupils nationally. This is the case in a wide range of subjects, including English, mathematics, science and the humanities. Most disadvantaged pupils made at least good progress overall in their GCSEs. In 2017, 61% of pupils achieved at least a good grade in both English and mathematics GCSEs. This was well above the national average of 42%. You and your staff have done this by an uncompromising focus on high standards of behaviour and of teaching, learning and assessment. The school gives young people an excellent standard of education.

Pupils feel safe and their welfare is managed exceptionally well. During the inspection, we saw pupils behaving with high standards of courtesy and politeness in lessons and at breaktimes. Pupils feel valued and trusted by their teachers. The school is a very orderly place. Pupils stand up when an adult comes into the classroom and this is done without self-consciousness. It is typical of the civility and respect we found everywhere in the school.

Lessons are well planned and teachers use information about pupils' progress to challenge them appropriately. Teachers use resources efficiently and imaginatively. Pupils' workbooks

show progress over time that is often well in advance of other pupils nationally. Inspectors saw English lessons where pupils were being challenged to read widely and often. In mathematics, pupils were eagerly learning about challenging topics such as quadratic equations. In science, pupils were learning how to be curious about physical forces and electricity.

Together with the previous headteacher, who retired in December 2017, you have led the school to its current strong position. In the document outlining your vision for the school, you say, 'It is through discussion, a willingness to be open and the security of sharing thoughts and opinions without fear or ridicule which help us move forward.' This spirit is evident in the life of the school. Teachers are trained to be confident and imaginative. As a result, lessons are engaging and challenging. Inspectors saw lessons where pupils were challenged to develop new understanding and acquire knowledge carefully and securely. You set targets for your pupils, but this is done thoughtfully and with the pupils, parents and carers so that they see them as realistic and challenging. The overwhelming majority of pupils, staff and parents support what you are doing.

Your school is characterised by an excitement for learning, and plenty of opportunities to learn, rather than a focus on simply passing examinations. The high grades pupils get in GCSEs in a wide range of subjects mean they are exceptionally well prepared for the next stage in their education. You have very high expectations of your staff. Teachers say they appreciate this and enjoy working with leaders. They feel well supported and get good development opportunities.

The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum for all pupils. Many more pupils than the national average are entered for English, English literature and the subjects of the English Baccalaureate. A high priority is placed on social, moral, spiritual and cultural education and this threads through everything in the school curriculum. Pupils are given opportunities to take part in extra-curricular classes in sport, art, music and drama. Pupils spoke highly of the recent production of *Bugsy Malone*. Displays throughout the school are of high quality.

The governing body is a strength of the school. Governors have an efficient and well-managed cycle of monitoring, evaluation and review. They hold you and school leaders to account for school improvement and they ensure that they are kept up to date with developments. For example, you and your leadership team worked closely with governors to make marked improvements in the provision for languages and in the progress made by the current cohorts of disadvantaged pupils. You work closely with the local authority and colleagues there speak highly of your leadership and of the education the school provides.

Safeguarding is effective.

You, your staff and governors have developed a positive culture of safeguarding throughout the school. Efficient and secure records of staff recruitment are maintained. Staff are well trained to help pupils if they encounter safeguarding issues. The overwhelming majority of parents believe that the school is a secure and safe environment. This view is supported by the well-documented records kept about behaviour incidents.

Pupils feel confident about approaching any member of staff with issues if they feel worried.

There is a high degree of trust in the culture of your school. Everyone is vigilant to potential dangers and risks. The curriculum helps pupils to stay safe. For example, pupils are well educated in online safety, how to avoid bullying and how to report safety concerns. Pupils learn how to respect other cultures and beliefs and know the dangers of radicalisation and extremism. Together, you, your staff and pupils have created a culture where high standards of welfare are apparent.

Inspection findings

- There have been marked improvements in the grades pupils gain in GCSEs. Pupils now securely achieve much better grades than other pupils nationally with similar starting points. For example, in English, mathematics and in the English Baccalaureate, lower, middle and higher ability pupils get much better grades than their peers nationally. You have paid particular attention to the achievement of boys and pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. Inspectors could see that the progress made by pupils in most year groups currently at the school is a marked improvement on previous years. This is because you have trained your staff to plan lessons more effectively and set targets that are securely built on pupils' previous achievements.
- You have improved the progress made by pupils supported by the pupil premium and Year 7 catch-up grants. This year, in most year groups, there have been significant improvements in the progress made by these pupils. In English, pupils are helped to read widely, home-school support is effective and pupils are taught resilience and self-confidence. A few pupils last year who were supported by the pupil premium grant did not make good progress. You are determined to continue your relentless focus on this vulnerable group of pupils.
- Pupils' attendance is better than the national average. Pupils want to come to school. They told inspectors they find their lessons interesting. They say teachers are caring and their peers are friendly. Staff work closely with families where attendance is a problem. As a result, this year, there has been a marked decline in the proportion of disadvantaged pupils whose attendance was not frequent enough. You know there is more to do here because there is still a very small minority of disadvantaged pupils who do not attend school often enough to be successful. Staff are working with the local authority and families to secure the attendance of these pupils.
- You and your staff have made progress in tackling the areas identified in the previous inspection. Boys are now making much better progress than in previous years, especially those currently at the school. In mathematics, disadvantaged pupils have been helped to improve their mathematical reasoning and problem-solving skills. They now make as good progress as other pupils. This is because the school helps pupils to learn securely, ensuring that everyone understands each area of skill and understanding before moving on to the next.
- The previous inspection report also required the school to use information about progress more effectively. This has improved and leaders are able to see how well different groups of pupils are doing throughout the school. Teachers now use information about progress to plan effectively to meet the needs of pupils with different abilities. Teachers and teaching assistants know how to target their resources so that pupils overcome barriers to their learning.

- You have developed systems for evaluating the life of the school regularly and securely. Staff challenge each other with confidence, using a range of information about pupil progress and behaviour. This means that teachers, managers and governors can discuss precisely how to focus resources and training. As a result, there have been significant improvements for pupils currently at the school, especially disadvantaged pupils, boys and pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities.
- You work with other schools both in your federation and locally. This means you can check the quality of pupils work against that of pupils in other schools to ensure that it is of a high standard. It also allows you to share ideas, resources and staff expertise. Teachers speak highly of this and say how much they value working with other schools to gain and develop expertise. Pupils, staff and governors believe they have a responsibility for and to each other. They aim to learn with optimism and safety. This is crucial to the success you have achieved in leading a school that is a beacon of excellence and is achieving remarkably high results for pupils right across the curriculum.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- continue the rigorous approach to self-evaluation and monitoring so that the high standards are maintained and developed for the full range of pupils at the school
- continue to work on school attendance for pupils at risk of low attendance to make sure that vulnerable pupils continue to receive a wide range of support and challenge.

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

Yours sincerely

Graham Tyrer
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors observed learning in lessons throughout key stages 3 and 4 and conducted joint work scrutinies with members of the senior leadership team. They held a range of meetings with the headteacher and other members of the senior leadership team, middle leaders and representatives of the governing body. Inspectors had meetings with pupils. They scrutinised the single central record, met with the designated safeguarding lead and examined a range of records about recruitment, welfare plans and actions taken to keep pupils safe. Inspectors scrutinised a wide range of documentation, including that related to self-evaluation and development planning. Inspectors considered the responses to the staff questionnaire and the responses to Parent View. There were no responses to the pupil questionnaire. The lead inspector discussed the school with a member of the local authority and took two telephone calls from parents during the inspection.