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Mr Dean Kavanagh
Chair of the Board of Directors
The Romero Catholic Academy
c/o Corpus Christi Catholic Primary School
Langbank Avenue
Coventry
West Midlands
CV3 2QP

Dear Mr Kavanagh

Focused review of the Romero Catholic Multi Academy Company

Following the focused review of all eight Romero Catholic academies in March 2018, and the subsequent follow-up visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors, I am writing on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the findings.

Thank you for your cooperation during our visit to the Romero Catholic Multi Academy Company (the company) from 12 March 2018 to 14 March 2018. Please pass on our thanks to your staff and other stakeholders who kindly gave up their time to meet us.

The findings from the focused review and a wider consideration of the company's overall performance are set out below.

Summary of main findings

- Overall, academic standards across the company's schools at primary level rose in 2017 and are broadly average. Reading and writing, however, continue to present a stronger picture than mathematics when compared to national figures. Standards in the secondary school are also improving but with more of a way to go.
- Much of the good and outstanding provision within the company has been maintained and key weaknesses, particularly at the secondary phase, are now being tackled at a brisk pace. All three schools that require improvement are heading in the right direction. However, for two of these schools, the most recent inspection judgement indicates a decline from before they joined the company.

- The quality of leadership and teaching across the primary phase is stronger than in the secondary phase. While secondary leadership is starting to improve, the company's established support networks are heavily focused on primary schools. The company's teaching school has played a pivotal role in developing the quality of leadership and sharing effective practice in primary schools.
- Transition arrangements for pupils as they move from key stage 2 to key stage 3 are now being developed in several positive ways as a result of better communication. However, there is still more work to be done to ensure that secondary school teaching capitalises on the gains pupils have made in the primary years.
- The company was slow to get going when it first started and, initially, this slowed the pace of school improvement.
- The company's oversight of the use and impact of pupil premium on the achievement of disadvantaged pupils is not strong. As a result, the outcomes for these pupils remain behind those for other pupils nationally, although some of the primary schools have had a better impact. The board of directors is aware of this but is not making the most of available information to drive improvements for disadvantaged pupils.
- The company's governance arrangements mean that some decisions have to be approved by the diocesan bishop and founder member. In the past, this has delayed some crucial decisions about school leadership and actions to drive school improvement.
- The company has a strong moral purpose. School leaders report that staff and pupils feel a sense of common identity and a shared vision. Current school leaders willingly collaborate with one another and believe that the company has helped to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their schools.

Evidence

Inspections of all eight schools in the company were carried out between 6 and 8 March 2018. Four of the inspections were carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005 (as amended) (the Act). Three inspections were short inspections carried out under section 8 of the Act. One inspection was a section 8 (exempt) no formal designation inspection of a school previously judged to be outstanding. This was the first time any of the schools had been inspected since becoming academies within the Romero Catholic Multi Academy Company. The inspection outcomes were:

- One school retained the predecessor school's outstanding judgement.
- The three schools that received a section 8 short inspection remained good.
- One of the schools that received a section 5 inspection was judged to be good, which was an improvement on its predecessor school's judgement.

- Three of the schools that received a section 5 inspection were judged to require improvement. Of these three schools, two had a lower overall effectiveness judgement than their predecessor schools and one had a higher judgement.

I had telephone conversations with company directors on 6 and 8 March. During follow-up visits, discussions were held with you and other senior and operational staff from the company. A range of relevant documentation was also scrutinised.

Context

- The Romero Catholic Multi Academy Company was set up in 2015. It takes its name from Oscar Romero, a priest and bishop in El Salvador.
- This company has seven primary schools and one secondary school. One of the schools, Sacred Heart Primary, leads the Blue Sky Teaching School Alliance. All of the schools joined the company in August 2015 and all are located within Coventry local authority.
- The seven primary schools are converter academies and the secondary school is a sponsor-led academy.
- Across the company, approximately a third of pupils are classed as disadvantaged, which is above the national figure. Just over half of all pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds and around a third speak English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is below the national average.
- The company is led by a board of 10 directors. The board is made up of five foundation directors (appointed by the diocese), two principal directors, two staff directors and one parent director. The board has to seek approval from the diocese for certain decisions, such as any appointments to senior Catholic posts.
- The board of directors delegates local responsibilities to school-based academy committees or, in the case of the secondary school, a school improvement board. These responsibilities include day-to-day operational matters such as Catholic life, health and safety, staffing appointments and developing the unique identity, local community and traditions of the school.
- In addition, there is a committee of principals that provides tactical advice and reports formally to the board.

Main findings

- The company was slow to get going when it first started. This caused plans for school improvement in the primary phase to stall and allowed resistance to change in the secondary phase to persist.
- An analysis of pupils' achievement in national tests and examinations across the company in 2017 reveals that:

- at key stage 1, the proportions of pupils meeting the expected standard in reading and writing were broadly in line with national figures, but below national figures for greater depth; in mathematics, results were below those seen nationally at the expected standard and at greater depth
 - at key stage 2, the proportions of pupils achieving the expected standard or above in writing was above national figures – the proportions reaching the expected standard in reading and mathematics were broadly in line with the national figures, but below average at the higher standard
 - key stage 2 progress scores were above average in writing, average in reading and below average in mathematics, with the progress of disadvantaged pupils lagging behind the progress made by other pupils in all three subjects
 - at key stage 4, pupils' progress and attainment in several subjects, including mathematics and science, were weaker than the national picture – key stage 4 achievement in English and humanities was stronger, with pupils' progress matching that of other pupils nationally with similar starting points.
- In the last 18 months, school improvement activity has increased, with some marked positive effects on the quality of leadership and teaching in primary schools. Indeed, across the primary phase, academic standards, while below average overall, are heading upwards. There is no doubt that this is the result of a well-informed and coordinated approach to school improvement across the primary phase.
 - The leadership of teaching and learning provided by key leaders at the Blue Sky Teaching School, for example, is proving instrumental in spotting and developing talent and sharing best practice across the company.
 - There is still work to be done to improve the quality of education further across the primary phase, with two primary schools requiring improvement in several aspects of their work. Improving progress for disadvantaged pupils and raising achievement in mathematics are priority areas.
 - Directors have found it hard to bring about change and drive improvement at the secondary phase. There are several reasons for this. First, there is only one secondary school, which has not, until recently, drawn on expertise from elsewhere. Second, until 2017, the school followed its own path and resisted the company's efforts to help. Third, the delays in improving leadership in the school, even when board of directors challenged the situation and recommended that the local academy board was suspended and replaced with a school improvement board, resulted in prolonged poor performance.
 - Current leaders in the secondary school are working collaboratively with the company for the common good to positive effect. However, there is still a degree of uncertainty about the long-term future because of the temporary, but currently effective, leadership arrangements. In addition, the further level of decision-making for an appointment to a senior post, because of the need for approval by the diocesan bishop and founder member, has caused delays in the past. This must not happen again.

- The company has plans to change the leadership structure to introduce a chief executive officer post or equivalent. It believes this will enable decisions about school leadership and improvement to be taken and acted upon quickly.
- In the early days of the company, the different levels of accountability and decision-making caused some miscommunication and inertia. For instance, some schools found it hard to adjust to the new structure and tried to carry on as before. Similarly, communication between the diocese, schools and the board of directors was not as efficient as it might have been. Work to improve teaching and learning took second place behind work to sort out practical and structural matters. Consequently, the company was slow to address the causes of a decline in standards in at least two of its primary schools.
- The board's oversight of the use and impact of the pupil premium on the achievement of disadvantaged pupils is underdeveloped but improving. Directors do not have a fully informed view about how well actions to boost progress for disadvantaged pupils are working. Newly introduced systems will enable directors to have an improved ability to share and learn from the good practice that exists in some of its schools. There is a range of additional systems for checking on the welfare, attendance and behaviour of all groups of pupils, including the disadvantaged.
- The board of directors and senior leaders in schools have worked hard to establish the current sense of team spirit and common identity that exists across the company. In the early days, this was not easy and some school leaders were resistant to change. Current school principals, however, willingly engage and work together to focus on improving pupils' welfare and achievement across the company, not just in their own schools. Through the networks created by the company, staff at all levels keep in touch with staff in other schools and share resources and learn from one another's practice.
- School leaders report that a sense of common purpose and identity is shared by staff and pupils. Regular company training days and special events that bring schools together, as well as peer-to-peer reviews, contribute to this and help to bring about overall improvements.
- Company leaders have put in place a range of measures to attract, keep and develop school staff. The company provides staff with opportunities to work across different schools, which helps to broaden their experience, sharpen their skills and share effective practice. Furthermore, the company identifies highly effective teachers in the early years and key stages 1 and 2 and gives them leadership roles that require them to work with different schools in order to raise expectations and improve provision. However, where the company needs it most, at key stages 3 and 4, there are much fewer opportunities for sharing practice.
- Transition between key stages 2 and 3 is a priority development area for the company. Given that at least a third of pupils in the company move to its secondary school, directors recognise that this is a key thing to get right. To assist with this work, the company's key stage 2 lead practitioner has started running weekly classes at the secondary school for the most able Year 6 pupils.

In a similar vein, the newly appointed secondary school principal is getting more involved with the company's primary schools in order to strengthen links.

- The company has ensured that it can balance its overall budget while holding reserves for development and central services. Where individual schools' budgets do not cover their outgoings, the company takes effective action to remedy this. There are numerous examples of economies-of-scale benefits that have been secured by the company's centralised services team.
- The company maintains a helpful and constructive relationship with the local authority, for example through support for principals' appraisal.
- The company has a strong sense of moral purpose, which is articulated clearly by key leaders. The board of directors has effective systems for gathering information about the work and performance of the company's schools and has an informed view of current strengths and areas for development. The company's evaluations of each of its schools, for instance, aligned very well with the recent Ofsted inspection judgements.

Safeguarding

- As a result of leaders' audit of all schools' safeguarding arrangements, the company is confident that safeguarding is effective in all its schools. Recent inspections confirmed that this is the case.
- Communication about safeguarding matters is managed efficiently. The company has ensured that directors, local academy committees, school leaders and staff have a level of training that enables them to understand their duty of care. Consequently, procedures to keep pupils safe work well.
- Pastoral staff and an attendance officer work across all the company's schools. This strengthens the company's overview of safeguarding and welfare matters. It also ensures that concerns are identified promptly and followed up correctly. When concerns have arisen, the appropriate agencies have been involved.
- Company leaders have an informed understanding of local risks to pupils and a clear overview of the support, provision and culture in all of its schools. Consequently, the company is able to evaluate the effectiveness of its systems and plan for further improvements to safeguarding practice.

Recommendations

- Improve the company's oversight of the use and impact of pupil premium on the achievement of disadvantaged pupils.
- Secure permanent leadership and sustained school improvement in the secondary phase so that academic standards rise.
- Continue to make best use of expertise that exists across the primary phase of the company in order to raise standards further and address pockets of underachievement, particularly in mathematics.

- Capitalise on the improved working relationships between the primary and secondary phases in order to assist a smooth transition of pupils between key stages 2 and 3.
- Ensure that different tiers of decision-making at board and diocesan level help to drive school improvement quickly when needed.

Yours sincerely

Martin Pye
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex: Academies that are part of the company

Schools inspected as part of the focused review – section 8 (exempt) no formal designation

| School name | Region | Local authority area | Opening date as an academy | Previous inspection judgement for predecessor school | Inspection outcome in March 2018 |
|-------------------------------|---------------|----------------------|----------------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| Sacred Heart Catholic Primary | West Midlands | Coventry | August 2015 | Outstanding | Outstanding |

Schools inspected as part of the focused review – section 8 short inspection

| School name | Region | Local authority area | Opening date as an academy | Previous inspection judgement for predecessor school | Inspection grade in March 2018 |
|---------------------------------|---------------|----------------------|----------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| St John Fisher Catholic Primary | West Midlands | Coventry | August 2015 | Good | Good |
| Corpus Christi Catholic Primary | West Midlands | Coventry | August 2015 | Good | Good |
| St Gregory's Catholic Primary | West Midlands | Coventry | August 2015 | Good | Good |

Schools inspected as part of the focused review – section 5 full inspection

| School name | Region | Local authority area | Opening date as an academy | Previous inspection judgement for predecessor school | Inspection grade in March 2018 |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|----------------------|----------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| St Peter and Paul Catholic Primary | West Midlands | Coventry | August 2015 | Requires improvement | Good |
| Good Shepherd Catholic Primary | West Midlands | Coventry | August 2015 | Good | Requires improvement |
| St Patrick's Catholic Primary | West Midlands | Coventry | August 2015 | Good | Requires improvement |
| Cardinal Wiseman Catholic Secondary | West Midlands | Coventry | August 2015 | Inadequate | Requires improvement |