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17 June 2011

Mrs A Appleyard
Principal
St Aidan's Church of England Academy
Hundens Lane
Darlington
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Dear Mrs Appleyard

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools: monitoring inspection of St Aidan's Church of England Academy

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your academy with Peter Bannon, additional inspector on 16 June 2011, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during the inspection. Please thank all of the students who spoke to us during the day, for their friendliness, honesty and openness. I have considered their views carefully when making judgements.

Since the last inspection two assistant principals have been appointed to fill current vacancies and there have been a number of staff changes in the English, mathematics, physical education, religious education and art departments. At the time of the inspection safeguarding arrangements were judged to be good: they continue to be so because senior leaders and members of the governing body remain vigilant in ensuring students' safety and well-being.

As a result of the inspection on 27 January 2010, the academy was asked to address the most important areas for improvement, which are set out in the annex to this letter. Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the academy has made good progress in making improvements and good progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.

Attainment across the academy is improving. The increase in the proportion of students attaining five GCSE grades A* to C or equivalent has been impressive, moving from significantly below average in 2009 to significantly above in summer 2010. Current assessments show the academy is maintaining this strong improvement. In 2010, results were not as good when taking English and mathematics into account. This was in part due to weaknesses in the English department. Decisive action has been taken to improve matters and results for Year 11 students who sat English and mathematics GCSEs in November 2010 show the academy has already exceeded its challenging 2011 target and is on-track to achieve even more. As a result, the gap between the academy's results and the national average is narrowing. Last year's gap between boys' attainment and girls' is also narrowing effectively, due to improvements in the quality of teaching, assessment and

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targeted support to students at risk of underachievement. Students successfully meet their targets in subjects within the Business and Enterprise specialism and participation rates are high. Students begin business studies in Year 8 and this early start is impacting positively on the number attaining five good GCSEs.

Lesson observations, scrutiny of students' books and assessment data confirm students are making better progress in lessons. Leaders have been particularly successful in accelerating progress in Year 7, in this their first year in the academy, not least due to the good transition arrangements and House and family group system that help them settle in well. The proportion of good teaching is increasing. Inadequate teaching has been virtually eradicated through an array of strategies including rigorous monitoring of teaching, professional development opportunities, coaching, sharing good practice already in the academy, and robust performance management arrangements when necessary. Good relationships between teachers and students typified all lessons observed. Lessons are purposeful and students generally apply themselves quickly to their learning. Teachers mark and assess work regularly. In the many good lessons observed, this information is used to plan activities well-matched to students' individual starting points, with a range of practical tasks enabling students to take more responsibility for their own learning. Assessment sheets, 'yellow tokens', clearly identify students' achievements, their progress and what they need to do to reach the next level. Occasionally, teachers do not use this information well enough to make sure activities fully challenge all students to do their best. Leaders know this and are taking action to eliminate remaining inconsistencies.

The academy's increasingly successful work to improve the quality of teaching has been accompanied by an equally rigorous and successful approach to improving behaviour and attendance. Current information shows that attendance rates are nearer to the national average, representing significant improvement on previous years. The proportion of students who are absent for long periods has reduced dramatically. Students comment positively about how much behaviour has improved and how the number of lessons disrupted by poor behaviour of one or two students has reduced substantially. Teachers apply the academy's behaviour management strategies consistently and this helps to promote a calm classroom climate and diffuse potentially difficult moments. Students are polite and friendly and were seen to behave well in lessons, around the academy and in the grounds outside. Improvements in behaviour are adding to students' stated feelings of safety and well-being. Although some report that bullying incidents occasionally occur, they assert that such occasions are rare and are quickly tackled once an adult is informed.

After a period of turbulence, staffing is more stable and leadership and management have been strengthened through the appointment of two assistant principals and wider involvement of middle leaders and teachers in driving the academy's improvements forward. Teachers are clear that improvement has accelerated since the last inspection and morale is higher. Most teachers implement the academy's policies, including increasing opportunities to develop students' basic skills across the curriculum. Teachers say they feel fully accountable for the progress of their students through rigorous performance management arrangements and professional development opportunities. Leaders and staff are challenged

and supported well by a knowledgeable governing body that is fully involved in the academy's rigorous self-evaluation processes. Governors look beyond their own expertise to successfully secure valued and good support from the sponsors and external consultants in their shared quest to ensure all students can make the most of their time here and succeed.

I hope that you have found the inspection helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Margaret Farrow
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place 27 January 2010

Improve students' achievement by:

- ensuring that teachers use information from marking and day-to-day assessment when planning work for students
- providing students of all abilities with tasks which help them to progress well in all lessons
- increasing opportunities for students to participate in practical or investigative tasks which help them to consolidated their knowledge and understanding
- ensuring that all teachers implement the academy's policies and guidance so that weaknesses in students' basic skills are identified and eradicated.
- Improve attendance.