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30 June 2011

Mr C Reid
Headteacher
St Hild's Church of England Voluntary Aided School
King Oswy Drive
West View
Hartlepool
County Durham
TS24 9PB

Dear Mr Reid,

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools: monitoring inspection of St Hild's Church of England Voluntary Aided School

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when Peter Bannon, additional inspector, and I inspected your school on 29 June 2011, for the time you gave to our phone discussion and for the information which you provided before and during the inspection. Please pass on my particular thanks to those students with whom we met and to the representatives from the governing body and the local authority who gave up their time to meet with us.

Since the last inspection, the deputy headteacher has left and has not been replaced. The roles and responsibilities of the leadership team have been redefined to produce a more distributed leadership model. Two middle leaders are now seconded to the extended leadership team each year on rotation. There have been new appointments at middle leadership level, including in mathematics, science and humanities. There have been changes to the composition of the governing body and a new Chair of the Governing Body has been appointed. Two new buildings – a performing arts facility and a city learning centre – have added further teaching space and information and communication technology capacity to the school site.

As a result of the inspection on 11 January 2010, the school 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 school has made inadequate progress in making improvements and satisfactory progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.

Improvements in students' achievement are not being driven with sufficient urgency and, as a result, attainment remains low. In the examinations in 2010, the majority of attainment measures declined further, although there was an improvement in the proportion of students gaining five or more A* to C grades including English and mathematics. Differences

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in attainment between boys and girls, and for students known to be eligible for free school meals, did not close and the pattern of variation between subject areas seen at the previous inspection remained unresolved. Fewer than half of all students secured five or more good GCSE passes and attainment in science fell significantly when measured against improvements seen nationally. A three-year downward trend in performance, across the majority of progress measures, indicates the gap to national levels of performance is not being closed quickly enough.

The school's own data for 2011 show some improvement in attainment for students currently in Year 11, especially in the proportion expected to secure five or more good grades at GCSE. However, the gains expected in 2011 across a range of other indicators are much more modest, although further improvement is expected for students currently in Year 10. Current levels of attainment in science are rising, although outcomes are expected to remain below those seen nationally. The significant underachievement of a small minority of students supported through alternative curricular provision remains, although the school has plans to address this and broaden the curriculum offer. Overall, attainment remains low and the progress made by students from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 is below nationally expected rates.

The variation in the quality of teaching noted in the previous inspection report remains. Some outstanding and some inadequate teaching was seen during the inspection and steps to reduce this variation have not been consistently effective. The school has succeeded in supporting improvements where teaching was previously identified as inadequate, but features of less-effective practice remain. For example, not all teaching meets the needs of all groups of learners well or the methods used do not inspire or capture students' interests effectively. In the best lessons, particularly in humanities, students take more responsibility for their learning, collaborate well and display good attitudes. Where teaching is less effective, the pace of learning slows because teachers talk for too long. In such lessons, students become overly dependent on the teacher for support because the teacher does too much thinking for them or does not encourage them to be more active participants. Students say that there is much variation in the way teachers manage behaviour in lessons. As a result, the pace of learning slows markedly where poor attitudes are not promptly and effectively challenged. The impact of students' behaviour on learning when expectations are not high enough, which was noted during the previous inspection, remains an issue. However, the behaviour of students around the school site and in the movement between lessons is calm and orderly.

Leadership and management structures have been refined and strengthened. The headteacher has a clear vision of the need to balance targeted intervention with the drive to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Middle leaders are a committed and enthusiastic group who share the vision for change. Improvement plans have an appropriate range of priorities but lack a sharp enough focus on improving outcomes or on developing provision for those groups of students known to be underachieving. Planning lacks clear success criteria against which progress can be more sharply evaluated, and timelines are too open ended to be effective.

As a result of training and support, the governing body is now providing effective challenge for the school and has a better understanding of performance data. Members of the governing body are more self-evaluative and their profile is being raised, for example, through the links to subject departments or aspects, such as the provision for gifted and talented students. Newly established systems to track students' progress are robust, reliable and are effective in targeting support for students at risk of underachievement. There is now an increased emphasis on lesson observations to sample the quality of provision, but inspection evidence confirms that the school's view of the quality of teaching and learning is overgenerous. A regular programme of review of subject areas has been established and the peer-to-peer element of this is beginning to provide useful opportunities to share good practice between subject teams. However, there is insufficient rigour, urgency or a clear enough focus on outcomes for students to raise the quality of teaching and learning more rapidly. Attendance has improved further and is now above average and levels of persistent absence are in line with that seen nationally.

The impact of the school's specialism is seen in the increasing popularity of the engineering diploma offer. This is well supported by a range of partnerships, led by the school, including with other local secondary schools and with further and higher education establishments. All students at the school follow a course leading to accreditation in design technology and the 'engineering days' are a useful vehicle to promote different styles of teaching and learning. A similar event for Year 6 pupils is effective in supporting their transition from primary schools.

Valuable support for coaching, professional development and for senior leadership has been provided by the partnership with another secondary school through the Gaining Ground initiative. The local authority has provided good support for training members of the governing body and the work of advisers and consultants through the National Strategy has been particularly welcomed in mathematics, English and science and in supporting the development of school self-review.

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,

Mr Lee Northern
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place on 11 January 2010

- Raise attainment by ensuring that learning and progress are consistently good across a wider range of subjects including mathematics and science.
- Reduce inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and learning by:
 - eliminating the small amount of inadequate teaching
 - increasing the pace of learning
 - raising all teachers' expectations of behaviour in lessons
 - sharing good practice across the school
 - encouraging students in all lessons to be more actively involved in their own learning, to assess their own performance and to learn independently.
- Ensure that the governing body plays a full part in the drive for higher standards by monitoring the work of the school more closely and becoming more involved in setting appropriate priorities for improvement.