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26 April 2013

Mrs Catherine McCoy  
Principal  
St Aidan's Church of England Academy  
Hundens Lane  
Darlington  
DL1 1LL

Dear Mrs McCoy

**Requires improvement monitoring inspection visit under section 8 of the Education act 2005 to St Aidan's Church of England Academy, Darlington**

Following my visit to your school on 25 April 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings of my visit. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in January 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

**Evidence**

During the visit, meetings were held with a group of students, the Principal and senior leadership team, the Chair and two other governors and an assistant director from the Diocese of Durham. Further meetings were conducted with subject leaders for English, mathematics, science and the academy's specialism, the alternative provision coordinator and directors of student progress. A telephone conversation took place with a representative of the sponsors. Several documents were scrutinised including the academy's action plan and governor meeting minutes.

**Context**

The Principal was appointed shortly before the section 5 inspection.

**Main findings**

Governors and senior leaders are taking the right steps to tackle the weaknesses identified in the inspection report. The improvement plan provides clear strategic direction for the work being done and contains appropriate benchmarks to check on progress.

The roles undertaken by senior and middle leaders have been helpfully revised so that leadership responsibilities are directly focused on making improvements to teaching and learning and students' behaviour. This marks a key change in the way leaders work with other staff. Lines of accountability are now clear and understood. Review meetings are providing senior leaders, and more recently governors, with an on-going forum for checking on progress. These changes are providing a much welcomed sense of purpose and direction. Nonetheless, the Directors of Students' Progress are currently not present at the review meetings so they are unable to influence key decisions at this stage about the provision for individual students.

The Principal has ensured that lesson observations check on students' learning and progress rather than predominantly on what teachers are doing. This is being done currently by senior staff but needs to include middle leaders so they can take a shared responsibility for making improvements. The Principal and governors' assertion that all staff must be co-responsible for improving their own performance and the progress of students is entirely correct.

The introduction of new data software is strengthening the academy's capacity to track students' progress and behaviour across different subjects and departments. While its introduction is recent, it offers a potentially powerful tool to search out underachievement, identify weaknesses in particular subjects and year groups and target interventions.

Governors were aware of weaknesses in the academy's performance prior to the inspection and this informed their decisions about the expertise required in the new Principal. Governors are demonstrating a sense of urgency in tackling the weaknesses identified in the inspection report. Their work is being heeded by the accurate information being provided for them by the Principal and this is underpinning their capacity to challenge academy staff about students' performance and progress against action plan priorities. This is particularly evident through the work of the curriculum and standards committee. While governors are appreciative of the efforts of senior staff they are expectant about the pace of improvement.

Senior leaders and governors have begun to take effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. Following the visit to the school, HMI recommend that further action is taken to:

- Find, as a matter of urgency, a high performing school which can be instrumental in supporting improvements in teaching and learning, students' behaviour and in building leadership capacity.
- Ensure that Directors of Students' Learning are fully engaged in review meetings so they can be proactive in planning interventions at individual student and cohort level.
- Ensure that all middle leaders play a full role in supporting improvements in teaching and learning.

Ofsted will continue to monitor the school until its next section 5 inspection.

## **External support**

The academy needs to draw on high quality external support as soon as possible, particularly in relation to making rapid improvements in teaching and learning and in building wider leadership capacity.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Education for the Church of England Diocese of Durham.

Yours sincerely

Tom Grieveson

**Her Majesty's Inspector**