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6 June 2013

Mrs Samantha Leslie
Headteacher
St Benedict's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Middle School
Moorhouse Lane
Ashington
Northumberland
NE63 9LR

Dear Mrs Leslie

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of St Benedict's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Middle School

Following my visit to your school on 5 June 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and findings of the inspection. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection which took place in November 2012. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

The school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Corporate Director of Children's Services for Northumberland County Council.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Farrow
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in November 2012

- Improve the quality of teaching in mathematics in order to rapidly accelerate pupils' progress and raise their achievement by:
 - revising how staff are allocated to teaching groups to reduce the impact of non-specialist teaching
 - assessing the performance of all teachers in the subject to identify where improvements are needed and setting targets for individual staff to improve
 - providing training to improve teachers' subject knowledge, assessment methods and understanding of the levels at which pupils are working
 - insisting that staff have higher expectations of pupils' work and output in lessons
 - expecting staff to mark pupils' work regularly so that they discover errors in pupils' working methods and understanding
 - providing more practical resources and problem-solving activities so that pupils are able to work out things for themselves.

- Increase the proportion of good and better teaching in other subjects by:
 - improving the accuracy with which teachers assess pupils' learning so that they have the correct expectation of what all groups of pupils can do and especially provide good challenge for the most able
 - ensuring that the needs of the less-able pupils are well understood and that appropriate methods are used to develop their confidence to succeed by providing work that allows them to get on with their work at a good rate and find out things for themselves.

- Improve leadership and management by:
 - training and supporting the head of mathematics so that he has a good understanding of how to set and check targets to improve performance in the subject
 - supporting the head of mathematics to manage the work of non-specialist teachers
 - improving the rigour of school leaders' lesson observations by focusing on how well all groups of pupils learn and make progress during lessons rather than on what teachers do
 - ensuring that work in pupils' books guides judgements of the quality of teaching over time and checking work regularly to ensure pupils make consistently good progress in all their learning
 - developing governors' understanding of all data about pupils' performance, including published data, and of the school's procedures for checking on progress so that the governing body is able to robustly challenge the school over performance in different subjects and that of different groups of pupils.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 5 June 2013

Evidence

During this inspection the inspector held meetings with the headteacher, other senior leaders and middle managers, a group of pupils, the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governing Body and a representative from Northumberland County Council's school improvement service. The headteacher and inspector observed four lessons together. The inspector looked at a range of information including, the post-Ofsted action plan and reviews of the plan, information about pupils' achievements across the school, pupils' books in lessons observed, minutes from recent governing body meetings and local authority Steering Group minutes.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection two teachers have returned from sickness absence. Currently one teacher remains on long-term sickness leave. Governors have had further discussions with the Department for Education and have formally requested not to become an academy. They are awaiting a response from the department. Proposed additional funding from the National College of School Leadership for the work of the National Leader of Education and her expert mathematics teachers has not been forthcoming; the local authority is funding this support. The Steering Group meetings, set up shortly after the inspection to monitor progress of the post-Ofsted action plans, have moved from fortnightly to three-weekly. The meetings include the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governing Body, local authority officers and the headteacher.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

The headteacher, her senior team, the governing body and staff have been energised by the drive for improvement, to be removed quickly from serious weaknesses and be a good and then outstanding school. The building blocks the headteacher put in place immediately after the inspection and actions being taken are making a positive difference to the quality of teaching and to pupils' progress. The post-Ofsted action plan has been sharpened further to make sure success criteria are precise and to enable governors to hold those responsible for carrying out actions more accountable for the impact of their work. Senior and middle leaders report they are improving their skills in observing teaching, scrutinising pupils' work, teachers' planning and assessment information to check the impact of teaching on pupils' learning and progress in lessons and over time. The headteacher's observations of teaching and lesson observations conducted during this visit indicate the quality of teaching across the school is improving and the proportion that requires improvement is declining. Pupils' books seen show pupils are making better progress over time. The headteacher knows that more work needs to be done to ensure all teaching is as good as the best in school. Actions being taken include sharing more widely the good practice in teaching across the school, teachers

working together, a range of training and development activities and more robust performance management arrangements. Such actions alongside the good support from Sacred Heart Catholic High School are improving the leadership of mathematics and hastening the progress pupils are making in the subject.

Improvements to the way teachers check how well pupils are doing in class mean they now have regular information about pupils' current levels of ability. This information is increasingly being used to plan activities to meet the different needs of pupils in lessons. The headteacher is aware that some teachers are not using this information well enough yet and she is continuing to train and coach staff in its better use. Senior staff also use this information in the formal meetings they now have with teachers to check the progress of individual pupils and to identify what other actions teachers need to take if someone is starting to fall behind. Senior staff report that they are being more challenging in these meetings when issues of concern arise and are beginning to hold staff to account for the achievements of pupils they teach more effectively. They know there is more work to do to make sure all teachers tackle the gap in achievement between boys and girls and pupils known to be eligible for free school meals and other pupils.

The governing body has been strengthened by the new governors appointed after the inspection. As a group they have reviewed their own strengths and weaknesses. They quickly received training to fill gaps in their knowledge and improve their understanding of the kind of data information they need to check how well pupils are doing and to challenge leaders more successfully. They now receive a wide range of assessment information about pupils' progress, including that of different groups of pupils, such as those entitled to free school meals and other groups at risk of underachieving. Governors are much more involved in the life of the school; each member is linked to a subject leader who reports on their subject in detail. Governors now have a regular programme to monitor the work of the school including the outcomes of the headteacher's and the senior team's monitoring of the quality of teaching. Minutes of meetings and reports show that the governing body is offering increasingly successful challenge to the headteacher and her staff on the progress of different groups and in ensuring actions in improvement plans are making a difference to the quality of provision for pupils across the school. A small group of governors attend the local authority Steering Group that monitors the progress of the action plan every three weeks. Minutes of these meetings identify the detailed discussions they have with the headteacher and the local authority on progress towards completing the actions in the plans. Minutes also show that occasionally discussion has focused on peripheral issues and what has been done, diverting representatives away from the core business of monitoring the impact of the actions that have taken place. Governors are now more confident about monitoring and have already decided to tackle this at the next meeting.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Most strengths are identified above. Additionally, pupils report positively on improvements to lessons, how they are more interesting and how they now have much more time working in pairs or groups. They also say they have a better understanding of how well they are doing because of teachers' marking, from the targets they are set in subjects and the feedback they get from teachers on how well they are doing against these targets.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Approaches that need to improve further are reported above. Additionally, although current good practice in teaching is shared across the school, the leaders of mathematics supporting the school have provided limited opportunities for teachers to observe examples of excellent practice through demonstration of their teaching in school.

External support

Leaders continue to receive support from Sacred Heart Catholic High School, St Joseph's RC Middle School and St Augustine's Catholic Primary School. This school-to-school support was brokered by the local authority, in partnership with the Diocese of Newcastle and Hexham. The local authority has provided significant additional funding to support these arrangements but have yet to check its quality. This work is due to be carried out later in the term. Leaders value the range of skills and expertise brought to bear, for example, the support to improve pupils' progress in mathematics and in developing a more rigorous monitoring and evaluation process. Leaders also value the on-going support from the local authority officer who visits the school regularly and who provides challenge during the three-weekly strategic meetings with the headteacher and representatives of the governing body. This is helping the headteacher and her team focus on what needs to happen to improve further.