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Miss Maria Elliott
Headteacher
St Benedict's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Middle School
Moorhouse Lane
Ashington
Northumberland
NE63 9LR

Dear Miss Elliott

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

Following my visit to your school on 26 November 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 most recent monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the third monitoring inspection since the school was judged as having 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, the Corporate Director of Children's Services for Northumberland.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Farrow

Her Majesty's Inspector

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 third monitoring inspection on 26 November 2013

Evidence

The inspector met with the executive headteacher, a group of senior and middle leaders, representatives of the governing body including the Chair, the Director of Catholic Education from the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, a senior leader from the local authority's school improvement service and a group of pupils. The inspector scrutinised documents relating to the school's review of progress towards actions in the school action plan, information about the work of governors and pupils' achievements across the school. She also carried out four lesson observations; three of which were joint observations with the headteacher and deputy headteacher. During lesson observations the senior leaders and inspector looked at pupils' work books.

Context

There has been a change in headship of the school since the second monitoring inspection. The previous executive headteacher, who was also headteacher of St Aidan's a local Roman Catholic First school, has rescinded this additional role. She has been replaced by a headteacher from St Mary's Roman Catholic primary school in South Tyneside.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Good communication and joint work between the previous and current headteacher from the latter part of the summer term 2013 has guaranteed no pause in the drive to move the school from the serious weakness designation. The headteacher's uncompromising and decisive leadership has resulted in a tightly refocused improvement programme. There is evidence that the steps collectively taken are having a continued, positive impact on the quality of teaching and on pupils' progress over time. In 2013, Year 6 pupils' attainment in reading and writing was above average and improved to average in mathematics.

Careful, regular assessment of pupils' achievements in lessons and checking of this information against pupils' end-of-year targets show that the rate of progress pupils make in lessons is accelerating. This is because more teachers are using the information about pupils' current levels of ability to plan varied tasks that move them on quickly. Leaders know there is still some way to go to ensure all pupils achieve their best, particularly the most able. They are aware that some teachers are still giving all pupils the same work. This means work is sometimes too easy for higher ability pupils. In-school training and teachers' visits to St Mary's to see good and outstanding teaching is helping teachers to understand better how to plan lessons that meet pupils' varied needs. Refocused pupil progress meetings between teachers and leaders and the more regular assessments of pupils' work are helping to identify pupils at risk of falling behind more quickly so that additional support and small-group work can be provided to help pupils catch up.

Governors have continued to improve their effectiveness in holding leaders to account for the actions being taken to improve the school, through regular training, scrutiny of their

own effectiveness and through attendance at the local authority and diocesan regular steering group meetings, convened to check the school's improvements. Minutes of steering group meetings and various governing body meetings, record the increased level of challenge and questioning from governors to school leaders and the additional information demanded by them to be able to check fully the progress and achievements of all pupils across the school as well as the quality of teaching. Governors speak confidently of the changes they have made and how much more confident they are in challenging the school's leaders now they have better information to hand. Governors report that the recent addition of the Chairs of the various governing body committees into the steering group has helped to ensure the whole governing body has a good understanding of the progress the school is making and has helped to develop their skills in asking probing questions further.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Middle leaders speak of added vigour the headteacher has brought in holding them to account for their own areas of expertise and in driving improvement in the quality of teaching and pupils' progress at a faster rate.
- Pupils report that teaching is improving, particularly in mathematics where it is more 'fun'. They say they like it when teachers start with learning objectives in lessons because it helps them to understand what they will be learning and then they can check at the end if they have achieved their goals.
- Pupils indicate that targets are helpful and some teachers' marking and feedback in books usually leaves them in no doubt what they have done well and what they need to do improve their work.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The quality of marking and feedback to pupils is improving. There are examples of good practice in some books but this is not consistently the case in all classes.
- The gap between the achievements of pupils entitled to additional pupil premium funding and other pupils in Year 6 in 2013 was too wide.
- Books show that some teachers are not challenging the more-able pupils well enough when they complete the same work as the other pupils.

External support

The headteacher and senior team continue to value the challenge and support from the local authority and diocese. They have worked together to strengthen and challenge leadership through the regular steering group meetings and the good transitional arrangements for the new headteacher. Local authority adviser work with middle leaders in observing teaching and scrutinising pupils' books is supporting improvement in the quality of teaching through the increased level of challenge to teachers through feedback following this work. School-to-school support from St Mary's for subject leadership in mathematics is resulting in improved leadership of the subject and pupils' faster progress in lessons.