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18 June 2014

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

Dear Miss Elliott

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Benedict's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Middle School, Northumberland

Following my visit to your school on 17 June 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings. 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 February 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The school should take further action to:

- ensure that the school's improvement plan is regularly and carefully monitored to confirm that the actions being taken are driving improvement quickly enough, particularly with respect to pupils' progress.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with the executive headteacher, deputy headteacher and assistant headteacher, middle leaders with responsibility for English and mathematics, the Chair and five other members of the governing body, and representatives of the local authority and the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The school improvement plan was evaluated and I undertook a brief tour of the school with two students to consider their views about the school's provision.

Context

The subject leader for English will retire at the end of the summer term. From September the school intends to reorganise the structure of Years 5 and 6 to follow a largely primary curriculum and Years 7 and 8 to follow a secondary curriculum. Two new class teachers have been appointed and new phase heads of both Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 will be appointed during the autumn term.

Main findings

Governors, the executive headteacher and senior leaders have responded well to the areas for improvement identified at the previous two inspections. Actions in place prior to the most recent inspection have been strengthened and sharpened and consequently the pace of improvement is accelerating.

The school improvement plan clearly identifies the most important priorities which need to be addressed, together with a range of appropriate strategies for improvement work. Timescales are challenging but realistic as are the success criteria by which these will be measured. For example, systems to improve how the school tracks the attainment and progress of individuals and groups of pupils have been strengthened and this information is enabling teachers to plan more effective lessons in which activities better match the needs of all pupils. However, middle leaders need to take a more active role in checking on standards and driving forward improvements in teaching and learning.

Governors and the diocese are supportive of the school leadership and are very well-informed about the work of the school. They visit the school and observe lessons on a regular basis. The focus and records of governor visits have been sharpened and now indicate much more clearly the challenge and support governors exert on senior staff.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The school, diocese and local authority rapidly brokered a substantial and effective range of support when the school was judged to be in serious weaknesses in November 2012. The current executive headteacher, who is also executive headteacher of St Mary's RC Voluntary Aided Primary School in Jarrow, has been in post since September 2013 and has agreed to lead the school until at least August 2015.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Northumberland and the Director of Education for the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle.

Yours sincerely

David Brown

Her Majesty's Inspector