

Serco Inspections
Colmore Plaza
20 Colmore Circus Queensway
Birmingham
B4 6AT

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T: 0121 679 9161
Direct email: ann.morris@serco.com



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Sam Bishop
Headteacher
St Mary's CofE Academy,
Rook Tree Lane
Stotfold
Hitchin
SG5 4DL

Dear Mrs Bishop

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Mary's CofE Academy, Stotfold

Following my visit to your academy on 9 July 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection 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 March 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:

- raise teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve
- improve the standard of writing, especially for boys.

Evidence

During the visit, I held meetings with you, five members of the governing body and spoke on the telephone with an advisor working on behalf of the diocese of St. Albans to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I also evaluated the academy action plans, minutes from meetings of the governing body and the academy's assessment information. Accompanied by you, we visited all the classes in the academy where we observed teaching and looked at pupils' work.

Main findings

You have responded quickly to the findings of the inspection, making improvements to teaching and changing the way that teachers assess pupils' progress. Things are improving but there is more work to do.

Pupils are doing well in the Early Years Foundation Stage. They join the academy with skills and knowledge that are above those expected for their age and make good progress through the reception classes, emerging with attainment that is well above average and, in some cases, exceptionally high. This good start is not being built on well enough and pupils are making average progress throughout the rest of the academy.

In recent years standards in Year 2 have been above average. This is not the case this year. Despite having a good start in the Reception classes, standards of reading, writing and mathematics for the current Year 2 are broadly average. In all other year groups standards in reading and writing are above age-related expectations.

Standards in writing are average across the academy, but the quality of boys' writing is below average in all year groups other than Year 4. In some classes, the differences between the writing of boys and girls are striking: boys' handwriting, punctuation and spelling are poor in too many cases.

Teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are too low in Key Stages 1 and 2. In response to this, you are revising the target setting systems across the academy so that senior leaders can track individual pupils. This system must ensure sufficient ambition for pupils in all targets.

The quality of teaching of reading in the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 is good and improving. Teachers in the Reception classes are actively seeking opportunities for pupils to reinforce their learning and, as a result, standards are well above national averages. Pupils are developing good strategies for reading unfamiliar words and are confident readers. Similarly, the way that teachers mark pupils' work has improved. Pupils are much more involved in their marking, and often respond to the comments that their teacher has made, showing that they understand what they need to do in order to improve. More improvement is needed in a small number of classes, where teachers are too accepting of basic errors in pupils' writing.

Your action plan focuses on the right areas for improvement overall. However, the need to urgently raise standards in writing, with a specific focus on boys, does not have a high enough profile in the plan. Additionally, the time-scales are not precise enough to allow for rigorous monitoring. You are working effectively in partnership with a National Leader of Education from a local school to learn from proven and outstanding practice. Your understanding of the academy's strengths and weaknesses is growing as you broaden the scope of your monitoring work, involving

other members of staff, and spending time finding out how pupils feel about the work that they are doing.

Governors commissioned an external review of their work quickly after the inspection and have acted on its recommendations to improve their work. They have undertaken training and have also secured the services of a National Leader of Governance who is providing further support. Governors are increasingly holding senior leaders to account and are making use of recent training to monitor pupils' achievement more effectively.

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

An advisor, jointly funded by the academy and the Diocese of St. Albans, is providing external consultancy. This includes leadership support and reviewing the impact of the academy's action plan. The support from the National Leader of Education is focusing on implementing more robust assessment systems so that pupils' progress can be monitored.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Diocese of St. Albans.

Yours sincerely

Christopher Moodie
Her Majesty's Inspector