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Mr Trevor North
Principal
Folkestone, St Mary's Church of England Primary Academy
Warren Road
Folkestone
CT19 6QH

Dear Mr North

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Folkestone, St Mary's Church of England Primary Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 10 January 2015, 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 academy since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in September 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 academy should take further action to:

- complete the review of governance
- show clearly how the impact of actions will be measured.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you, the Chief Executive Officer, four phase leaders and four governors to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I visited the classes with you and also looked at a number of documents. These included the academy's strategic plan, short-term action plans, checks on the quality of teaching and learning, records of governing body meetings, plans to introduce a revised

curriculum and to restructure the staffing of the academy. A representative from the diocese joined us for the feedback at the end of the visit.

Main findings

You have carried out a number of important actions since you joined the academy and since the inspection in September and these are beginning to show signs of promising improvement. Leadership roles have been re-defined so that classes are grouped into three age bands and leaders appointed to each of these phases. These new leaders are working closely with you and their teams to bring about improvements. You have worked with staff to produce shared and explicit expectations about the quality of teaching and behaviour management. Staff and governors commented on a revived sense of purpose, team working and enthusiasm across the academy. The phase leaders are making an increasingly valuable contribution to more regular and rigorous checks on the quality of teaching and the work in the pupils' books. Follow-up action is taken without unnecessary delay and staff who need to improve their practice are receiving appropriate guidance. There are more accurate systems to assess how well pupils are achieving in reading, writing and mathematics. Phase leaders and teachers are working together to make sure the judgements are accurate. Regular meetings are held to discuss the progress of individual pupils and class groups and to identify what teachers need to do to improve learning. All small group and one-to-one activities have been reviewed and stopped if the evidence shows that they are not working.

Teachers are using the new national curriculum for English and mathematics and this is helping them to plan more effective lessons. This is beginning to raise teachers' expectations about how well pupils can, and should, be achieving. Staff have joined curriculum teams and, although this work is at an early stage, it is beginning to drive improvement, particularly in English. There has been well-focused staff training, for example, to improve the teaching of reading across the school. The most recent checks on teaching and learning show pupils are more enthusiastic and their reading skills are improving.

You have carried out a rigorous evaluation of the academy's strengths and weaknesses. This self-evaluation is a useful working document. It is more accurate than the previous one and more sharply focused on the areas for improvement identified during the section 5 inspection. These priorities had already been identified by the academy and are included in the academy's strategic plan. However, the strategic plan is rather complicated and does not have measurable milestones to check the progress of improvement. You have rightly produced a working weekly and six-weekly action plan which is much more sharply focused and includes some measures to show what success should look like at the end of each six-weekly term.

The governing body was instrumental in driving improvements from a worryingly low point during the last academic year. Governors have carried out a self-review and have been closely involved in devising and monitoring improvement plans. The external review of governance recommended by the section 5 inspection is being carried out by the diocese and has not yet been completed. During the period of temporary leadership, the governors, understandably, became more involved than is normal in day-to-day activities and decision making. Records of recent meetings show they continue to discuss, in detail, issues which are normally the responsibilities of school leaders. It would be useful for the governors to receive training, possibly working with very effective governing bodies, to ensure they have a good understanding of how they can best use their time, skills, expertise and enthusiasm to carry out their strategic role. Governors and senior leaders should decide what to look for at several points during the year to judge whether the actions in the plans are actually making enough difference.

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

External support

You are keen to identify specific external expertise which you can use to address the academy's greatest needs. For example, you have carried out monitoring and moderation activities with a headteacher colleague from another district in Kent. You are also building links with a local academy. There are useful plans to build the leadership skills of you and your team by working alongside its leaders, one of whom is a national leader of education and another who is a specialist leader of education. The governing body is, quite rightly, making sure that, as a relatively new school leader you receive valuable external coaching. You have employed a consultant to provide staff training and coaching to improve the teaching of reading. The academy belongs to the Folkestone Church Ethos School Improvement Company. This group of academies works together to support school improvement. You are sensibly stepping back from full involvement with the group as your immediate focus is on strengthening those aspects which will make St Mary's a good school.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Kent and the Diocese of Canterbury.

Yours sincerely

Sheena MacDonald
Her Majesty's Inspector