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Mrs Nicole Gibbon
Acting Principal
St Aidan's Church of England Academy
Hundens Lane
Darlington
DL1 1LL

Dear Mrs Gibbon

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of St Aidan's Church of England Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 30 April 2015 with Belita Scott, Her Majesty's Inspector, 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 academy's most recent monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the academy was judged as having serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection which took place in October 2014. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

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

The academy 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 Director of Education for the Church of England Diocese of Durham and the Director of Children's Services for Darlington.

Yours sincerely

Mark Evans
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in October 2014

- Rapidly improve the quality of teaching so that it is at least consistently good, in order to raise achievement across all subjects, especially in mathematics, for the most able students, those with special educational needs and disadvantaged students, by:
 - ensuring all teachers have high enough expectations of what students can achieve, especially the most able
 - using information about what students can and cannot do, when planning activities, to meet their varying needs, and challenge them all to make good progress that is sustained over time
 - planning relevant and motivating experiences that fire students' interest and help maintain their concentration and perseverance
 - ensuring all teachers systematically check students' understanding in lessons and adapt work so that students learn well
 - ensuring all teachers provide regular feedback to students about how they can improve their work, and insisting that they respond accordingly
 - deploying teaching assistants effectively in lessons to enhance individual students' learning.

- Improve students' behaviour in lessons, and overall attitudes to staff and each other, by:
 - ensuring all teachers promote positive relationships and a productive work ethos when they are with students
 - ensuring that the academy's policies to manage behaviour effectively are implemented systematically and used consistently well by all staff.

- Raise students' attendance to at least the national average and reduce the proportion of students that are absent regularly, by:
 - promoting more visibly across the academy, through the academy's website and newsletters to parents, the importance of regular attendance and its link with good achievement
 - working more closely with families whose children are regularly absent from school.

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management, by:
 - ensuring middle leaders and managers feel confident, and have the necessary time, to use the academy's systems to track rigorously the progress of all groups of students and address underperformance early, to ensure all achieve equally well
 - ensuring all leaders and governors check the progress of disadvantaged students, particularly in mathematics, to narrow the gap between them and their non-disadvantaged peers, both in school and nationally
 - refining existing procedures for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching, by checking more carefully the quality of students' work over time, and their routine attitudes to learning
 - improving the relationship with parents so that any concerns raised are acted upon swiftly and successfully, and they are increasingly confident in what the academy is doing to promote their children's learning.

An external review of the academy's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 30 April 2015

Evidence

Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) met with the acting Principal, the Chair of the Governing Body, the senior leadership team and middle leaders. HMI also visited a range of lessons and scrutinised students' workbooks and folders. They scrutinised a range of documents, including the academy's development plans and its records of the quality of teaching. In addition HMI spoke on the telephone with a National Leader in Education, who is supporting the academy, and with a representative of the diocese of Durham, who is one of the academy's sponsors.

Context

Since the previous inspection, two further members have been seconded onto the academy's senior leadership team from other schools. One secondment dates from January 2015; the other from March 2015.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

- The acting Principal, now supported by recent additions to the senior team, continues to have a clear understanding of the weaknesses at the academy and is driving improvement. She has a clear vision and set of priorities which she shares fully with the academy community. Both staff and students report that they welcome this.
- Governors know what needs to be done at the academy and they are increasingly able to hold leaders to account. However, they do not engage directly with the academy. Consequently, their evidence about the academy's performance is too heavily reliant on the Principal and her senior team.
- Although the academy's planning is fit for purpose, it still needs improving. This is because the plan does not make clear who is responsible for leading each action and who is responsible for assessing the impact of these actions.
- Leaders have recently introduced a new approach to the management of behaviour and reward. This is bearing fruit. Academy records show that attendance is improving, especially in Year 11, and that there are fewer incidences of unacceptable behaviour. However, more needs to be done to ensure that poor behaviour is eradicated. Inspectors saw examples of low-level disruption where students were talking out of turn and were slow to settle. This type of behaviour hampers students' opportunities to take responsibility for their own learning and deepen their understanding.
- The more robust approach to marking and feedback introduced by leaders in December 2014 has now been further refined. It now focuses more clearly on improving the quality of teaching and learning. Where teachers are using this approach consistently, it is beginning to have a positive impact on learning. Students report that they understand and welcome the recent change and the way it encourages them to act on staff comments and advice.

- The leadership of the provision for disabled students and those who have special educational needs is weak. Plans are in place for the appointment of a new leader for this key aspect of the academy, but more needs to be done by leaders and governors to ensure that students who have special educational needs receive the carefully planned work and support they deserve. HMI will scrutinise the impact of the academy's work in this area during his next visit.
- Middle leaders are clearer about their roles in assuring high quality teaching. They welcome their growing autonomy and responsibility. The senior leadership team supports them effectively. However, not all middle leaders have the skills to hold their teams and individual staff members to account for the quality of their work.
- The weekly meetings of the sponsors' monitoring improvement group, a group made up of representatives of the sponsors, governors and staff from outstanding schools, is having a positive impact on the academy's progress. The group holds senior leaders to account and is a source of additional support.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Every member of staff, including teaching assistants, now has a teaching file where information about students, staff planning and assessment information is recorded. Although it is still too early to assess its impact, staff welcome this shared approach and see it as a positive contribution in helping the quality of teaching to improve. HMI will assess the impact of this and similar initiatives during his next visit.
- The academy has focused effectively on Year 11 students to help ensure that they are fully supported and challenged in the run-up to this summer's examinations. There are focused 'catch up' sessions in the mornings and after school when staff work intensively with students. The take-up of these after-school sessions is very high. The academy's data show that this intensive work is having a positive impact on students' progress.
- The academy has worked vigorously and effectively to raise its profile across the wider community. The Principal engages regularly with parents in a range of ways and encourages them to discuss any concerns they may have with her.
- The academy's systems for ensuring that students are safe are effective and meet statutory requirements.
- During this inspection, a very high proportion of students reported to HMI that they had noticed significant improvements in the academy. They particularly welcomed the more robust approach to the management of behaviour and the emphasis on reward. They said that this was having a positive impact on their learning and happiness.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The quality of teaching at the academy is still inconsistent. There is evidence to show that teaching is improving. However, staff do not always use the data they have about students to make sure that they plan lessons that cater for the needs of all their students. Too often, in the lessons seen, students who finished their work had to wait while others caught up.
- Teaching assistants are increasingly taking on more responsibility for the planning and assessment of students' work, especially in, for example, the early morning 'family' sessions. However, their work in lessons is not as carefully focused. Too often, teachers are not involving teaching assistants and other support staff fully enough in the planning of teaching. This means that too often the work that students receive is not focused precisely enough on their needs. Similarly, the systems for sharing information about students' progress between teaching assistants and teachers lack precision.
- The academy is not measuring the impact of the range of actions it takes to support disadvantaged students. As a result, leaders and governors are not clear about what is working well and what is not. Consequently, disadvantaged students do not gain the maximum benefit from the extra pupil premium funding. HMI will assess the impact of this aspect of the academy's work during the next monitoring visit.
- Although there are signs of improvement since the previous monitoring inspection, the presentation of work in students' books and folders is still not good enough. In too many books seen, pages were missing or torn and there were examples of graffiti. Additionally, in science, for example, it was clear that teachers do not always insist that rulers are used for the drawing of tables to set out results.

External support

The academy is receiving effective and sustained support from Whitburn Church of England Academy. This consists of leadership support as well as assistance with data and quality assurance. This outstanding teaching school is also effectively supporting areas of the St Aidan's curriculum, such as science and humanities.