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Ms Stephanie Benbow
Headteacher
St Mary's Church of England High School (VA)
Lieutenant Ellis Way
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Dear Ms Benbow

Short inspection of St Mary's Church of England High School (VA)

Following my visit to the school on 15 May 2018 with Daniel Leonard and Phillip Barr, Ofsted Inspectors, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in January 2015.

Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I have identified some priorities for improvement which I advise the school to address. In light of these priorities, the school's next inspection will be a full section 5 inspection. **There is no change to the school's current overall effectiveness grade of good as a result of this inspection.**

Leaders have demonstrated commitment to maintaining a good standard of education since the previous inspection, during a period in which the school has grown significantly. Staff know pupils well; pupils who arrive from outside of the local area settle quickly because routines are well established and expectations are clear. Pupils say that the school's ethos of 'valuing individual skills, talents and cultural heritage' is at the heart of what makes it unique.

Staff are supportive of your vision and they say that they feel valued for their professionalism. They are clear about their purpose in serving the children of your community. 81% of parents and carers who responded to the Ofsted online questionnaire, Parent View, agreed that they would recommend the school. The governors provide support and challenge for leaders because they are ambitious for the school and they know it well.

Pupils' attainment in GCSE English has improved since the previous inspection because learning is well planned. Pupils know what they need to do to improve their

work because their teachers give them helpful guidance.

You have made adjustments to the curriculum to ensure that pupils can study subjects which match their aspirations and needs. This has been particularly well-received by sixth-form students because they can now prepare for examinations in academic and vocational subjects. Leaders of all subjects have reviewed their curriculum plans, and are making changes at key stage 3 to ensure that pupils are prepared to meet the demands of new GCSE examinations. Pupils have access to a broad curriculum; for example, the school's work in the creative arts is regularly shared with the local community through exciting drama and music performances.

On the day of the inspection, pupils behaved well. Questionnaires completed by staff, pupils and parents suggest that this is generally the case. Pupils were welcoming and spoke openly to inspectors about their sense of belonging to the St Mary's High School community. The pupils that I spoke to like coming to the school because the adults who work with them know them well; as a result, attendance is improving.

You have now introduced rigorous moderation of pupils' assessments to help you maintain an accurate understanding of their current progress; this work is in development. As a consequence, governors, senior leaders and middle leaders lack a coherent understanding of how far pupils at all key stages are improving their knowledge, skills and understanding.

Governors and senior leaders acknowledge that the appointment of well-qualified teachers has been extremely challenging, particularly in science and modern foreign languages. New subject leaders have now been appointed. Early indications are that teaching and learning in these subjects is starting to improve. However, at this stage there are still gaps in pupils' learning; this has an impact on the overall progress that they make.

School leaders evaluate the school's strengths and areas for development well. You rightly acknowledge that the improvements made to teaching and pupils' progress in some subjects are not reflected in other areas, particularly in science, mathematics and modern foreign languages. Your new organisation of departments is supporting leaders and teachers to share good practice and drive improvement. However, it is too soon to gauge the impact of these new arrangements.

Safeguarding is effective.

The school has a culture where the safeguarding of pupils is taken very seriously. Safeguarding policies and procedures are secure. Staff receive training and are knowledgeable about what to do if they have concerns about a child. Records show that leaders and other professionals work together effectively to support vulnerable pupils. Pupils said that they feel safe in school because the adults who work with them know them well. Pupils receive a wide range of information through their personal, health, social and economic lessons, for example how to protect themselves against unsafe internet use.

Inspection findings

- At the start of the inspection we agreed five lines of enquiry in order to check that the school remains good. First, we looked at the extent to which leaders have improved teaching and learning since the previous inspection, particularly in science and mathematics.
- Your new staffing structure ensures that subject leaders are now more accountable for curriculum content and teaching. The monitoring and the evaluation of teaching and learning are beginning to be more rigorous in all subject areas. This work is at an early stage and you recognise that there is still work to do in order bring the leadership of all subject areas up to the level of the best.
- In most areas, learning is purposeful because teachers plan carefully in order to challenge the pupils they are working with. Teachers' subject knowledge is good. Pupils make good progress in English because teachers give clear explanations and pupils have good opportunities to practise their skills. One Year 8 pupil said, 'I know I am improving my writing because I now write in paragraphs'.
- In the past year, the school has experienced considerable turbulence in staffing in science and modern foreign languages. Specialist subject leaders have now been appointed and pupils say that they are making better progress. However, these improvements have come too late for some pupils.
- Pupils are regularly assessed in all subjects. In mathematics and science inspectors saw evidence of pupils reviewing and improving their assessed work. However, it was not clear how class work helps pupils to build the knowledge, skills and understanding required to do well in their assessments.
- The second line of enquiry examined the progress of disadvantaged pupils and those pupils in Year 7 who need extra help to improve their literacy and numeracy skills.
- Subject leaders are supporting teachers to know which pupils are disadvantaged. This helps teachers to ensure that these pupils can get additional support if they need it. Where teaching is strong, teachers give disadvantaged pupils thorough feedback so that they can make rapid improvements in their work.
- Leaders have also designed and implemented new curriculum pathways so that pupils and their parents can make choices that match their needs and aspirations more closely than before. Curriculum leaders and teachers regularly review the suitability of pathways for individual pupils so that adjustments can be made if required.
- The impact of the new curriculum pathways on the progress of disadvantaged pupils is not yet clear. Leaders' assessment records show that disadvantaged pupils are doing significantly less well than their peers at all key stages. The progress of disadvantaged pupils, including those with high prior attainment, requires further improvement.
- As a result of leaders' actions, Year 7 pupils who receive additional support to

improve their literacy and numeracy skills make good progress.

- My third line of enquiry questioned how effectively you monitor and evaluate the quality of education in the sixth form so that outcomes for students are at least good.
- Students' folders show improvements in the quality of work being produced; this is because teachers now have higher expectations of them. Students' attitudes to learning are improving because they now have a clearer understanding of the requirements of their examination courses. Leaders assess students' progress regularly; they also check the accuracy of their assessments by working with other schools. Academic mentors give additional support to students in the sixth form who are at risk of under-achieving and there is a focus on helping students to make effective transitions from GCSE to post-16 courses.
- Current information about students' progress is more accurate and it demonstrates that they are performing better than similar pupils did at this time last year. Attendance in the sixth form has also improved.
- Sixth-form students talked to inspectors about their experience of the sixth form. They feel confident in the school setting, but they were clear that post-16 education in the school does not fully meet their needs and expectations. This is because the sixth form is not distinctly different from earlier key stages.
- The final line of enquiry focused on safeguarding and pupils' attendance. This was because a higher than usual number of pupils left the school during 2016 to 2017, and because higher than average proportions of vulnerable pupils are persistently absent.
- You have a detailed understanding of why pupils leave the school and also how you deal with 'in year' arrivals from other schools, local authorities and countries outside of the United Kingdom. You work very effectively with an extremely complex range of organisations. This means that pupils are looked after well at all stages of their education.
- Pupils told inspectors that they are confident that they can report problems or concerns to staff who work with them, and that they are listened to and prompt action is taken if required.
- Leaders track attendance tirelessly, and work particularly carefully to improve the attendance of the most vulnerable pupils by building good relationships with parents and external organisations. Leaders' actions are beginning to have an impact. For example, the attendance of pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities is improving.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- leaders and teachers use assessment information effectively at all key stages to improve pupils' outcomes
- funding for disadvantaged pupils is used more effectively to diminish the differences in progress and attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their

non-disadvantaged peers nationally

- they improve the quality of teaching and learning in the sixth form so that students make progress that is at least in line with students with similar starting points nationally
- they offer sixth-form provision that caters for the maturity and interests of their students.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the Director of Education for the Diocese of St Albans, the regional schools commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Hertfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jennifer Carpenter
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

The inspection started with your self-evaluation of the school's performance. We agreed the lines of enquiry that the inspectors would follow during the inspection. Inspectors looked at a range of school documents, including current assessment information, safeguarding case studies and governing body minutes. Inspectors visited lessons, looked at work and had discussions with pupils. Other meetings were held with the deputy headteachers, the assistant headteacher, the SEN and/or disabilities coordinator and the designated safeguarding lead. The lead inspector spoke to the chair and vice-chair of the governing body and the deputy diocesan director of education. In addition, inspectors considered 100 responses to the staff survey and 137 responses to pupil surveys. Inspectors also took into account 87 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire for parents, Parent View.