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Mrs Nicole Gibbon
Principal
St Aidan's Church of England Academy
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Dear Mrs Gibbon

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Aidan's Church of England Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 16 November 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the monitoring 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 monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school has received two successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections. At its section 5 inspection before the one that took place in September 2017, the academy was also judged to require improvement.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection, in order for the academy to become good.

The academy should take further action to:

- conduct an external review of the school's use of the pupil premium, in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved
- amend strategies designed to support disadvantaged pupils so that the progress that these pupils make is accelerated
- ensure that teachers plan activities that meet the needs of the most able pupils.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders, governors and the chair of the governing body. I also met with a group of pupils to hear their

views relating to the school's actions taken since the last inspection. The school improvement plan and evaluations of teaching were reviewed. I visited English, mathematics and geography lessons, jointly with a senior leader. Together, we observed pupils' learning and evaluated work in pupils' books. I scrutinised a wide range of evidence including the school's self-evaluation, analysis of performance information, attendance and behaviour records, safeguarding files, recruitment checks and minutes from governing body meetings. I considered the 36 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View.

Context

Since the school was judged to require improvement in September 2017, a new assistant principal with responsibility for intervention and an assistant principal with responsibility for English have been appointed.

Main findings

You and a skilled senior leadership team are rallying the school. You are not complacent. Since the previous inspection, many aspects of the school's work have improved.

A strong Christian ethos is evident throughout the school. The weekly act of collective worship is a joy to be part of. Pupils gather, as one, to celebrate, reflect and pray. During the inspection, I observed pupils and staff delivering a message of 'hope'. Pupils were engrossed while they watched their peers and staff take part in a role-play and sing. Pupils and staff say that, for many, this is the highlight of their week.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is improving. New approaches to teaching and learning are now embedded. All lessons include the school's 'scripted' start and finish. Teachers ensure that pupils are on task as soon as they enter the classroom. Similarly, the way pupils reflect on their learning is consistent across all subjects. Pupils say that this helps them to improve because they know what to expect. Teachers use the time in lessons wisely. Leaders are outward facing. They use a wide range of improvement partners to help teachers improve their skills in the classroom. In addition, leaders encourage teachers to become assistant examiners in their subjects. This provides teachers with a broader understanding of examination rubric and improves their subject knowledge. Most teachers use the information they have, in relation to pupils' prior learning, to plan activities that meet their varying needs. However, the least effective teaching does not ensure that the most able are pushed to their limit. Consequently, pupils with high attainment on entry continue to make the least progress, over time, when compared to other pupils from their different starting points.

At the previous inspection, leaders were asked to improve attendance rapidly. Leaders' strategies to monitor pupils' attendance are much more effective now.

Consequently, staff are able to intervene and offer pupils early help with their attendance when required. Pupils, spoken to during the inspection, could all tell me their attendance figures for the year. This is because teachers speak to pupils regularly regarding the benefits of good attendance. Furthermore, leaders have introduced a wide range of rewards to encourage pupils to attend more often. This and the 402 home visits last year have led to rates of attendance increasing since the previous inspection. Pupils' attendance is now in line with the national average. However, disadvantaged pupils continue to attend less often than their peers and others nationally.

Leaders were also asked to develop pupils' learning behaviours in order to heighten their engagement in lessons and accelerate their progress. During the inspection, pupils' attitudes to learning were very positive. They were eager to play an active role in each lesson and worked efficiently and cooperatively in groups. Pupils' work books are orderly. They demonstrate that pupils commit to improving their work and include many examples where pupils have used their initiative to overcome a problem. Pupils say that behaviour in class and around school is much improved. They say that this is because the relationships between teachers and pupils are stronger. Pupils welcome the opportunity to sit with their teachers at break and lunchtimes. Teachers keenly pay attention to pupils' interests and aspirations. The school's own information demonstrates that the proportion of pupils who are excluded for a fixed period is reducing. This is in addition to a reduction in the number of pupils who are excluded internally or receive a detention.

The school improvement plan is fit for purpose. Following the last inspection, leaders amended the plan to ensure that it was precise and closely matched the areas for improvement highlighted in the previous inspection report. Leaders, including governors, have a detailed understanding of the strengths and weakness of the school. Variability in the quality of subject leadership is reducing. This is because senior leaders provide subject leaders with support and challenge in equal measures. Senior leaders say that they 'assume nothing'. They have introduced a wide range of procedures to check the quality of others' work. For example, every subject assessment is checked for accuracy and rigour by a senior leader. Some are appraised by improvement partners or staff in other schools. Similarly, when teachers mark pupils' assessments, a sample from each class is checked by senior leaders. This ensures that teachers are following the school's assessment policy. By doing this, leaders are more confident in the accuracy of internal assessment results. Leaders have conducted an internal review of the use of pupil premium funding in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved. Nonetheless, an external review is well overdue.

External support

School leaders work closely with a number of improvement partners. They receive regular advice and guidance relating to teaching, assessment, pupils' behaviour, attendance and subject leadership. In addition, some staff receive support with

their teaching and/or subject leadership from a local teaching school. This is helping to improve the quality of teaching and subject leadership in some subjects over time.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese of Durham, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Darlington. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lee Elliott
Her Majesty's Inspector