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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



23 July 2019

Mr Richard Preece
Executive Headteacher
St Mary's School and 6th Form College
Wrestwood Road
Bexhill-on-Sea
East Sussex
TN40 2LU

Dear Mr Preece

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of St Mary's School and 6th Form College

Following my visit to your school on 10 and 11 July 2019, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the school's most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in February 2019. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. This inspection was aligned with a social care inspection.

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with you, the acting headteacher, the chair of the interim executive board (IEB), senior and middle leaders, the designated safeguarding lead and members of the IEB. I spoke on the telephone, in separate calls, to two representatives from East Sussex County Council (ESCC).

I met with a small group of pupils, assisted by two members of staff who acted as signing translators. I visited some classrooms with the acting headteacher and the strategic leader and scrutinised a sample of pupils' workbooks.

I reviewed the school's single central record of recruitment checks, documents provided by school leaders and other documents from the school's website. These included the school's post-Ofsted action plan, rapid improvements plans, IEB meeting minutes and a range of policies and records.

Context

The substantive headteacher left his post in February 2019. Most of the governors and trustees, including the chair of governors, resigned in March 2019. Two of the original governors remain. Since then, ESCC, in discussion with the regional schools commissioner's office, enlisted support from the Torfield and Saxon Mount Academy Trust (TASMAT). An IEB has been in place since March 2019 and includes representatives from TASMAT and ESCC. An executive headteacher and chair of the IEB, both from TASMAT, are providing extensive leadership support to the school. The deputy head of education is currently the acting headteacher and responsible for the school's day-to-day operation. Several leaders from TASMAT are providing senior leadership support in relation to safeguarding, business management support and the development of teaching, learning, assessment and the curriculum. A number of other staff have since either left or joined the school.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

Senior leaders are bringing stability and a sense of purpose to the improvement of the school. Middle leaders welcome the changes that are being made, they understand their roles clearly and they are held firmly to account for their work to improve the quality of education in the school. Firstly, senior leaders have rightly focused on ensuring that pupils are safe. Additionally, a wide range of systems, procedures and policies are being overhauled to create a more stable foundation for future improvement. There are early signs that leaders' efforts are starting to have a positive impact on the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection.

The leaders' post-Ofsted action plan closely aligns with the areas for improvement identified at the time of the previous inspection. The action plan accurately pinpoints the priorities to be addressed and reflects an appropriate sense of urgency. Helpful detailed rapid improvement plans, focused on specific aspects of development, link to the overall action plan. However, the post-Ofsted action plan does not describe clearly the milestones that will be used to measure the school's progress towards becoming a good school. Furthermore, the plan does not focus sharply on evaluating the impact of actions taken on improving pupils' outcomes. Leaders acknowledge that the plan needs to be updated, making use of the knowledge they now have about the school.

Safeguarding is improving at the school. The designated safeguarding lead (DSL) is receiving helpful support from ESCC. She is accessing training and is now part of a local network of support for DSLs, although she has not yet attended the DSL training delivered by the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Senior leaders acknowledge that this must be a priority. The DSL is developing her skills and understanding of her role in keeping pupils safe. Weekly meetings between the DSL and the behaviour and attendance leads ensure that staff work together to monitor concerns about pupils' welfare. Administrative errors identified in the school's single record of recruitment checks were rectified before the end of the inspection.

The school's system for staff to report concerns has been improved, now alerting leaders to safeguarding concerns promptly and clearly. Referrals to external agencies are made appropriately and in a timely manner. Previously, the school's record-keeping system was too unwieldy because it stored all worries about pupils in one place, regardless of whether these were about safeguarding, behaviour or minor accidents. Sensibly, the system has been improved so that these concerns are now kept separately to help ensure that reports about a pupils' safety or welfare are not missed. However, in transferring from one system to another, there remain a significant number of open referrals on the previous system. These have not yet been reviewed to check for any safeguarding concerns. As a result of the inspection, a plan is now in place to address this urgently.

Since the previous inspection, leaders have been working to improve communication with parents and carers. A 'parents' consultation group' has been established, led by a member of the IEB, to allow for a two-way flow of information. However, during the inspection, a small number of parents contacted Ofsted to express concerns about the school, including issues such as the safeguarding arrangements, pupils' behaviour and leadership. The concerns raised by parents did not reflect what was found in the school during the inspection. Despite leaders' recent actions to enhance communication, some parents remain mistrustful of the school. Leaders know that there is more work to do to improve relationships between parents and the school.

Pupils' attendance is now recorded and analysed more rigorously. The attendance leader tracks patterns of absence systematically. Concerns about any pupil's absence are followed up individually, including with a home visit when appropriate. The attendance leader reports regularly to the senior leadership team so that leaders maintain oversight of attendance across the school. As a result of this meticulous approach, pupils are starting to attend school more regularly.

The school's approach to promoting positive behaviour is getting better. During the inspection, pupils' behaviour was calm and positive. In classrooms, pupils are respectful and patient with each other. Pupils move around the site in a composed and polite manner, cheerfully greeting staff, other pupils and visitors. A new behaviour management policy and anti-bullying policy have been developed, sensibly promoting a consistent approach across the school. Whole-school staff training is scheduled to take place in the next few weeks, with the new policy implemented from September 2019. Since the previous inspection, there has been one fixed-term exclusion and no permanent exclusions. The school's exclusion policy has been rewritten and it is planned to share this with staff in the forthcoming behaviour training. The positive handling policy has also been reviewed. Records about the use of physical intervention carefully describe any incidents. However, record-keeping is presented in several different formats, hampering leaders' efficient oversight. The analysis of records of the use of physical intervention revealed several examples when, due to some pupils' limited language levels, they had not been debriefed following an incident. This is a concern, given the school's

specialist status in supporting pupils' communication needs.

Since the introduction of the IEB, governance is improving. There is now a clear distinction between governors and trustees. Governors are skilled and fully understand what the priorities for improvement are. School leaders are being held firmly to account. Each member of the IEB is taking a lead on an aspect of improvement and evaluating the school's progress carefully. Minutes of IEB meetings show evidence of the impact of their actions to improve the school. Governors are rightly working to secure the financial stability of the school.

Leaders' work to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is in the early stages. A new leader, from TASMAT, with responsibility for developing the curriculum has very recently joined the school. Staff have received helpful training, and leaders were pleased to see evidence of this being implemented successfully during our visits to classrooms. Encouragingly, additional adults are starting to be used more effectively to support pupils' learning. Leaders have rightly focused their efforts on improving safeguarding and leadership and management. Even so, the weaknesses in teaching, learning and assessment identified at the previous inspection are mostly still evident. Pupils' written work shows that the most able pupils are often provided with tasks that are not suitably demanding. Systems for the consistent assessment and monitoring of pupils' progress are still being established.

Helpful work is under way to review the school's use of the pupil premium funding. The review provides useful next steps to support leaders in prioritising the use of the money more precisely than in the past. The review is not yet complete, however, and more work is needed to ensure that the funding is used effectively to improve disadvantaged pupils' outcomes.

External support is helping to improve the school. Representatives from ESCC and TASMAT are providing useful skills and expertise to strengthen the leadership capacity in the school. Training, mentoring and on-site support are helping to ensure that the quality of provision in the school is improving.

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are taking effective actions towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's post-Ofsted action plan is not fit for purpose.

Leaders and governors must urgently ensure that:

- the open safeguarding referrals are urgently reviewed and acted upon, where necessary
- their improvement plans include clear milestones and a sharp focus on evaluating the impact of their actions on improving pupils' outcomes.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the IEB, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for East Sussex. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Claire Prince
Her Majesty's Inspector