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Mr Stuart Joyce
Headteacher
St Francis Church of England Aided Junior School
Scholars Path
Newton Aycliffe
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DL5 7HB

Dear Mr Joyce

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a Notice to Improve

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 30 January 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Please pass on my thanks to the many friendly and enthusiastic pupils I spoke to during the day, particularly those members of Year 6 who met me at lunchtime.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

As a result of the inspection in June 2007, the school was asked to:

- Raise standards through improving pupils' achievement and progress in English, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT)
- Increase the depth and breadth of the curriculum by improving the monitoring of its quality and outcomes, especially in subjects other than English and mathematics
- Improve the marking of pupils' work so that there is a shared understanding of what teachers and pupils need to do to improve learning.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making good progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the pupils' achievement in the core subjects.

The school's results in the 2007 national tests for 11-year-olds show that standards reached were average and pupils achieved well. Standards improved from being significantly below average overall and very low in English, in 2005 and 2006. Standards rose to average in mathematics and pupils reached above-average standards in science. The results were the highest for the school since 2001. The

achievement of these pupils, relative to their starting point, put them in the top five per cent nationally. The school has made outstanding progress in this aspect.

Standards are rising across the school as a result of: improved tracking of pupils' progress; improved teaching, which is increasingly good; and consistent strategies for marking and assessment. Teachers plan well and are using the information they gain from assessment to ensure that every pupil has work matched to their needs, whether it be extra support or extra challenge. Improved systems have been in place for the last two years but it was not until the summer of 2007 that their impact could be seen in higher standards and better achievement for the pupils.

A new computer suite has been installed and work will be completed before half term. The school has invested in new and up-to-date equipment and further staff training, and has developed a clear plan of action aimed at raising standards and achievement in ICT. Quantifiable and challenging targets have been set with the aim of achieving the ICT mark by 2009. Evidence in lessons and pupils' work shows that the school has made good progress in improving provision and promoting achievement in ICT.

The curriculum has been re-mapped to broaden the range of subjects, and monitoring is taking place to make sure that subjects are covered in sufficient depth. Progress here has been slower than in other areas because of the priority senior managers rightly put on raising standards and achievement. More opportunities are being sought to develop cross-curricular links between subjects to provide a wider range of opportunities for pupils to improve the key skills of numeracy, literacy and ICT through the full range of subjects. The curriculum is enhanced by specialist music tuition and a good range of activities for extra-curricular enjoyment. The school has devised better systems for monitoring the curriculum and there are plans to develop the curriculum further with an emphasis on excellence and creativity.

Marking and assessment are now strengths of teaching and nearly all pupils know their individual targets for literacy and mathematics. Pupils discuss these targets with understanding. In a recent questionnaire about the new marking system, 98 per cent of pupils said they liked the new system, with 74 per cent saying that, as a result, they are putting more effort into their work. The improved system, along with more frequent assessments, means that teachers have a far better picture of how well pupils are learning.

All the staff have worked together as an effective team, under the dynamic leadership of the headteacher and deputy, to share good practice, develop their classroom skills and improve the accuracy of their marking and assessment. I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school.

Yours sincerely

Judith Straw
Additional Inspector