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Friday 7 May 2010

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

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 Thursday 6 May 2010 and for the information which you provided during my visit. Please pass on my thanks to all of the staff and students I met as well as the chair of governors and school improvement partner who took the time to speak to me.

Since the last inspection there have been changes in the senior leadership team. One assistant headteacher has left and a consultant deputy headteacher has been appointed.

As a result of the inspection on 7 October 2009, the school was asked to raise the standards achieved by students in lessons by ensuring all teaching sets high expectations and makes effective use of assessment; strengthen leadership and management through a greater collaborative approach to school development and an increasing use and understanding of data; and ensure that the governing body effectively fulfils its duties to monitor and challenge the work of the school.

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

Standards at the end of Year 11 based on recent examinations in 2009, are well below the national average. The school's own assessment information suggests that standards in the current Year 11 are above average based on the proportion of students on course to achieve five good GCSEs including English and mathematics. Standards remain very low in science where there is inconsistency in the quality of teaching, particularly in middle and lower sets.

Leaders have a very secure knowledge of strengths and weaknesses in teaching and swift action has been taken to bring about improvements. A small proportion of



inadequate teaching remains but the overwhelming majority seen was at least satisfactory. Most lessons seen were characterised by appropriate lesson objectives that took account of the different needs of learners in the class. In the best lessons, students' levels and targets were identified and challenging activities were set to stretch the higher attaining students. In other lessons, objectives were still too generic. The quality of marking varies from one lesson to another. In humanities and art lessons seen students were very well informed how well they were doing and what they needed to do improve. Elsewhere marking was limited to praise comments and ticks and students not on track to reach their targets, were given little guidance how to improve. Most students know how well they are doing and what their targets are but they are less secure about how to reach them. Relationships between teachers and students are good. Students responded well to teaching even in those lessons where the pace was slow and activities were uninspiring. The new building has had a considerable impact on ensuring a calm ethos throughout the school, although planning restrictions imposed on the school has limited its use for after school activities until a link road bridge is completed. There were some good examples of effective use of group work and peer assessment but this is insufficiently developed.

The school has made good progress in the way leaders use data to monitor the progress of students. The introduction of 'teaching assessment and progress' monitoring, whereby subject leaders visit classrooms weekly is a powerful tool to bring about improvements but the inconsistencies in marking and lesson planning suggest it has not yet fully impacted on the whole school. Senior leaders have placed a high emphasis on whole school development to ensure greater consistency and collaboration in the way data is used.

Although the school has been a specialist college for three years, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT) have had insufficient impact on raising standards across the school. Although students report improvements in the quality of teaching in mathematics changes of leadership over time has slowed the department's development. In ICT a new curriculum has been introduced after the recent disappointing examination results at GCSE and this has very rapidly yielded improvements in raising standards and increased enthusiasm for the subject from students.

The senior leadership team has been enhanced and there has been a positive response to additional support, including that from the local authority which has played a valuable role in supporting and challenging the school, through its effective statement of action. All safeguarding arrangements are robust and secure and the school places a very high emphasis on safety and security of its students. The governing body has risen to the challenges set by the last inspection and has undertaken training to ensure it carries out its role to hold the school to account more effectively. Link governors have been set up with subjects but in some subject areas this is at an early stage of development.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Mark Sims
Her Majesty's Inspector

Once the school has had 24 hours to report any factual inaccuracies, the post-visit letter is copied as appropriate to the following:

- Appropriate authority - chair of governors/Interim Executive Board
- Local authority – except for academies
- For the Secretary of State use the following email address:
CausingConcern.schools@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk)
- Contractor providing support services on behalf of the local authority - where appropriate
- Diocese – for voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools

A copy with editing marked up should be forwarded to the:
Lead inspector