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Natalie Edwards
Principal
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Dear Ms Edwards

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

Following my visit with Sue Bzikot, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 1 and 2 December 2021, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the 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 to improve the school since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection that took place in January 2019. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. We discussed the ongoing impact of the pandemic with you and have taken that into account in our evaluation.

Having considered the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

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

Yours sincerely

Clive Close
Her Majesty's Inspector

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 1 and 2 December 2021

Context

The school was judged to have serious weaknesses in February 2019. The first on-site monitoring inspection took place in July 2019. Two further monitoring events took place in November 2020 and January 2021. Both of these events were undertaken remotely because of the impact of COVID-19. While the school has continued to improve throughout this period, it is clear that the impact of COVID-19 has delayed some aspects of leaders' work to improve the school, notably in their work to improve the school's curriculum.

The current principal is now confirmed in her substantive role, having been appointed acting principal in January 2020. The school continues to be supported by Torfield and Saxon Mount Academy Trust (TaSMAT). The Talking Trust continues to be the charitable trust that operates the school and sixth-form college.

Proposals about the school's future status are still being considered by the Department for Education, the school's board of trustees and directors and leaders from TaSMAT. Leaders are hopeful that these matters will be resolved soon, removing any doubt about the way ahead for the school and providing the long-term stability required for the school to improve further.

The inspection focused on the areas for improvement identified at the inspection that judged the school to have serious weaknesses. Inspectors also considered the quality of education the school provides, with particular regard to curriculum design, and how the school teaches pupils to read.

The progress made towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation

It is clear to see that, despite the impact of COVID-19, leaders and those in positions of governance have been active and effective in their work to improve all aspects of provision. The school's post-Ofsted action plan was judged as 'not fit for purpose' at the first monitoring inspection over two years ago. However, leaders had addressed this by August 2019. The school's current development plan is detailed, focuses on the right things, and is a useful tool for school improvement.

A collegiate and supportive culture is evident across the school. Members of the interim executive board (IEB), in place since May 2019, are completely invested in their work. School leaders at all levels, including the acting executive headteacher who is also the chief executive officer of TaSMAT, are totally focused and dedicated to moving the school forward. As a result, most of the issues identified during the inspection in February 2019 have been successfully addressed.

A key aspect of concern identified in February 2019 was that governors and senior school leaders did not work effectively together. They did not take collective responsibility for the school's decline and there was a culture of blame and mistrust. Quite simply, this is no longer the case. Relationships are professional and respectful. Leaders and those in positions of governance are reflective and open to challenge. They understand their roles and take collective responsibility for ensuring that the school improves rapidly.

Safeguarding is effective. Much work has been done to improve reporting systems and record keeping. Issues with open referrals identified at the first monitoring inspection in July 2019 were addressed immediately. Staff are appropriately trained and kept up to date about their duty to keep pupils safe. Leaders with additional responsibilities for safeguarding are knowledgeable about their roles. Those in positions of governance understand their responsibility to ensure that promoting the welfare, health and safety of pupils is given the highest priority. Importantly, the culture to safeguard pupils is strong. Pupils who talked to inspectors reported that they feel safe in school. Staff understand what to do if they have concerns and have confidence in leaders to act when needed.

Issues identified relating to pupils' behaviour and attendance have been addressed successfully. Observations of pupils' behaviour and attitudes to their learning were very positive during classroom visits. Pupils themselves report that behaviour is much better than in the past. There have been no exclusions since support from TaSMAT began in March 2019. Relationships between pupils and staff are very positive. Leaders have established clear protocols to intervene quickly when pupils' absence threatens to become a problem.

Leaders and staff understand the importance of applying the school's behaviour policy consistently across all phases of the school. Leaders monitor patterns in pupils' behaviour well. Support is put in place when needed. Pupils are positive about their own role in improving all aspects of the school. They feel they have a voice now, including through the school council, which was not the case in the past. Consequently, inspectors gained a positive impression of pupils' behaviour and attitudes to school throughout the inspection.

Work on improving the school's curriculum is ongoing. Some aspects of teaching and the school's vocational programme were identified as relative strengths in February 2019. However, a new education inspection framework has been introduced since that time and leaders know that more work needs to be done to improve the quality of education the school provides. It should be recognised that the impact of COVID-19 has been a barrier to this work. Nevertheless, leaders' aspirations are much higher than in the past. Expectations of what pupils can achieve by the time they leave the school are also much higher. Older pupils can now access GCSE and other programmes of study that lead to recognised qualifications.

The school's provision to help pupils to read has some recognisable strengths, and some aspects that need more work. Pupils' love of books and reading is promoted well. The school has one phonics scheme. Staff have had some training in how to deliver the scheme. However, not all staff who teach phonics or support pupils to become fluent

readers are as expert in doing so as they could be. Also, a pattern where the least expert staff teach phonics and early reading to the less-able pupils appears to have been established. Additionally, leaders have recently identified that a new phonics scheme would be beneficial, not least because it would involve staff undertaking an additional and comprehensive training package. Leaders know these issues need to be tackled as a matter of urgency now that other aspects of previous weaknesses have been addressed.

Leaders have established a coherent top-level overview of the curriculum in key stages 2 and 3. It has appropriate breadth and is reviewed periodically to make sure it meets the needs of pupils. The overview shows what aspect of each subject will be taught and when. However, curriculum planning lacks clarity about what specific subject knowledge will be taught, how this is linked to what pupils' have learned already, and how this will support their future learning. This means that teachers do not have all of the key information they need to plan learning, and that pupils have less chance to make links with what they already know. As with the issues identified with teaching pupils to read, leaders know this problem needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Staff are positive about their work at the school. They talk positively about how they feel the school has improved and how leaders support them in their roles. A recent survey of parents and carers conducted by school leaders also painted a positive picture about how leaders continue to move the school forward.

Additional support

The support offered by TaSMAT over the period since the February 2019 inspection has been fundamental to improving the school. A new trust board was put in place shortly after the inspection, chaired by an experienced director from TaSMAT. The IEB was also put in place at that time, securing governance and the strategic oversight of the school. A school effectiveness board (SEB) was formed a year ago in anticipation of the school no longer requiring the focused oversight of the IEB. The chief executive officer of TaSMAT continues to support and challenge leaders in the school in his role as acting executive headteacher. An external consultant brokered by TaSMAT offers leaders and staff useful support in their work to improve the quality of education and other aspects of provision. Collaborative work with leaders and staff from the two schools that make up TaSMAT is ongoing. This includes professional development to improve the school's phonics provision, for instance.

Evidence

The inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, other senior leaders, and leaders from TaSMAT. Inspectors also met with the chair of the Talking Trust and representatives of the IEB and SEB. An inspector also met with representative groups of pupils and a group of teachers.