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Richard Preece
Acting Executive Headteacher
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Dear Mr Preece

Additional, remote monitoring inspection of St Mary's School and 6th Form College

Following my remote inspection with Michael Green, Her Majesty's Inspector, of your school on 27 and 28 January 2021, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the 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 provide education to all pupils during the current circumstances.

This monitoring inspection was conducted under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 (as amended) and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for visiting schools while routine inspections remain temporarily suspended. It was additional to the usual monitoring process for schools that are judged to have serious weaknesses.

Following changes to government guidance and the imposition of COVID-19 (coronavirus) lockdown restrictions, this monitoring inspection was carried out remotely. As such, the range of evidence available to inspectors was narrower than would normally be the case during an on-site inspection. As a result, this letter provides a more limited level of assurance than our usual monitoring reports.

The inspection took place because the school was judged to have serious weaknesses at its previous section 5 inspection. The school's most recent section 5 inspection took place in February 2019.

Having considered all the evidence and taking into account the impact of COVID-19 on the school, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action to provide education in the current circumstances.

Leaders and those responsible for governance should take further action to:

- review all aspects of the school's provision to teach pupils to read so that they can be sure that the teaching of phonics and early reading is effective.

Context

- Since the last monitoring inspection in July 2019, there have been a number of changes in leadership at the school, although the interim executive board (IEB) has remained stable in this period. Although already providing consultant headteacher support, you were appointed as acting chief executive officer along with a new acting principal in January 2020. A new head of education and a new 'learning leader' for English joined in September 2020. A new lead teacher for mathematics started in January 2021.
- Very few pupils had to work from home in the autumn term of 2020.
- At the time of this inspection, broadly a third of your pupils are accessing remote education from home.
- Most of your teaching and support staff, including therapists, are currently working in school.

Main findings

- Leaders and those in positions of governance have been successful in providing education in the current circumstances. Newly appointed middle leaders are having a positive impact on improving the curriculum and the way it is delivered. This is true in all phases of the school, including in the sixth form. Although a small number of accredited qualifications were previously available, this has recently been broadened with the introduction of GCSE and additional BTEC National Diplomas for pupils in key stage 4 and 5. This is also a positive step.
- Leaders' actions before the start of the pandemic focused rightly on ensuring that the school was stabilised and that the pupils were safe. Since March 2020, you have made noticeable inroads into improving the curriculum. Because of this, pupils are accessing your full curriculum offer, although some sensible adaptations have been made in subjects such as music and in your provision of music therapy. This means that pupils, most with complex special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), are able to access learning both in school and remotely when required.
- Work on reviewing and improving the curriculum continues to be a priority. However, despite the best efforts of leaders, in some subjects, particularly in the humanities, this work is less well advanced. This is due in no small way to the impact of COVID-19 on the school.

- You continue to identify key priorities for improvement. These include in the delivery of your phonics programme and in improving pupils' reading fluency. Currently, pupils' reading books are not matched closely enough to the phonics sessions they attend. Because of the remote nature of this monitoring inspection, it was not possible for inspectors to be sure that all staff are expert in teaching phonics. However, you did agree with us that all teaching and support staff should possess a high level of expertise to deliver effective phonics support. This will be especially important for pupils who are in danger of falling behind.
- All pupils at your school have education, health and care plans. They benefit from very individualised programmes to support their learning and their social and emotional development. You have identified some pupils who are more vulnerable, and you are taking additional action to ensure that they are provided with extra support. This includes support from a range of outside agencies, including those to support emotional well-being.
- Governance is provided by the IEB and a smaller sub-group known as the school effectiveness board (SEB). Both the IEB and SEB have delegated powers and report to the school's trustees. Both groups comprise a range of highly experienced professionals with backgrounds in education, safeguarding and residential care. This includes members appointed by the local authority. Members have clearly defined roles which help to provide useful support and challenge to school leaders. As a result, pupils are being provided with an appropriate education when taking into account current circumstances. This includes pupils who are attending school and those who are not able to due to a range of circumstances, including some pupils who are clinically vulnerable.
- You are being selective about external support, aligned to the specific needs and context of the school. Most of this is provided by the Torfield and Saxon Mount Academy Trust (TaSMAT), in which you have the role of chief executive officer. This arrangement is increasingly mutually beneficial to the school and TaSMAT, especially in sharing good practice to address the restrictions imposed by COVID-19.

Evidence

This inspection was conducted remotely. We held a range of meetings with senior leaders, including the acting executive headteacher and the acting principal, curriculum leaders, teachers and pupils, as well as a representative group of parents. We also held an online meeting with the chair of the IEB and a separate meeting with four other members of the IEB to discuss leaders' actions to provide education to all pupils during a national lockdown.

We watched recordings of lessons in classrooms and of therapy sessions delivered by occupational health and speech and language therapists. We talked to pupils about their work, and we listened to them read.

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

Clive Close
Her Majesty's Inspector