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Mrs J Cogan
Headteacher
St Nichola's Church of England VA Primary School
St Nicholas Close
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Dear Mrs Cogan

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on Thursday 27 November 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Can I also thank senior managers, the chair of governors, local authority officers and a group of pupils for attending meetings.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

As a result of the inspection on 22 and 23 November 2007, the school was asked to:

- Raise pupils' achievement in writing, in particular that of boys, by giving more emphasis to meeting writing targets through work in all subjects
- Improve provision in the Foundation Stage by ensuring that all aspects of learning for children of this age receive appropriate attention
- Strengthen teaching by providing greater challenge to the learning of more able pupils.

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

Since 2007, considerable changes to staffing has delayed the introduction of some curriculum developments and restricted the impact of senior leaders in addressing the areas for improvement from the previous inspection. Over half of the teaching staff are new to the school, including a new deputy and assistant headteacher. Despite this turbulence, good progress has been made in improving provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), which is now satisfactory. Progress made in

strengthening teaching by providing greater challenge for more able pupils other than in writing, is also improving and is broadly satisfactory. However, progress in raising achievement in pupils' writing by setting targets for improvement have been less effective and is inadequate because not all pupils were sufficiently challenged to attain the highest levels in writing in 2008.

The above average standards attained in Key stage 1 in 2007 have been maintained. This year's results have remained the same in reading, declined slightly in mathematics and improved in writing. In Key Stage 2, standards have declined slightly in mathematics and science, reflecting a slightly weaker cohort but overall, they remained above the national average. The proportion of Year 6 pupils attaining the expected level in English rose from 71% in 2007 to 92%. However, the same weaknesses in pupils' writing that were identified in the previous inspection remain. For example, only 67% of boys attained level 4 compared with 77% of girls. In addition, 44% of pupils attained level 5 in reading but none of them attained level 5 in writing. The school acknowledges that teachers' expectations of what pupils are capable of in writing are still too low.

Since September, the school has focused its work on improving pupils' writing skills by using 'talking partners' to develop a wider vocabulary and by focusing on constructing sentences and paragraphs with suitable punctuation. The curriculum has been adapted to promote creative writing across subjects and writing targets are set in all subjects, but this is relatively new and is not yet leading to higher achievement. Plans are in place to introduce much more meaningful targets when 'The Big Write' is introduced next term. Visits to classrooms and scrutiny of pupils' work by the inspector confirmed that improvements are taking place but also found that pupil achievement in writing remains variable across the age range. Pupils in Year 6 were progressing satisfactorily, but in some younger classes progress was slower and the quality of written work was below average. The low expectations of some teachers are reflected in their marking which is regular but often praises work that is poorly presented, incomplete or simply not good enough. Not all teachers have the confidence to allow pupils to work independently on writing tasks for sustained periods of time.

Satisfactory progress has been made in strengthening teaching so that more able pupils are sufficiently challenged, although many of these improvements are relatively new and not firmly embedded. Lesson observations by senior leaders have focused on how teachers meet the needs of higher ability pupils and the school's own assessment information indicates that more of them are on track to attain higher levels this year. Teachers' planning now incorporates tasks to meet the needs of pupils of different abilities. Teachers have received training on posing questions to challenge more able learners. Pupils are beginning to think for themselves, plan and draft their written work and identify their own success criteria for what constitutes good quality writing. A small number of visiting poets and drama groups have helped to inspire pupils to produce some good quality writing. Older pupils use dictionaries and thesaurus to improve their spelling and vocabulary but there are few

opportunities for the most able to research in depth using the library or write using computers.

Considerable improvements have been made to provision in the EYES. Joint working between staff and local authority personnel has ensured that the Nursery and Reception areas are now rich, stimulating environments in which to learn. There is a much better breadth to the curriculum with sufficient time allocated to all six areas of learning. The balance of child-initiated play and adult led activities is better and keeps children busy, happy and excited. They are keen to show and share what they have produced with their teachers. They work well together in small groups and play imaginatively in their new surroundings. Teachers use stories to integrate themes and ideas with other aspects of learning and play. Assessments made in 2008 show that the progress made by most children compares favourably with local authority averages. Although further staffing changes are planned for next term, the improved understanding of existing staff and clearer leadership in the EYFS means that the school is well-positioned to build on the progress made so far.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school.

Yours sincerely

John Mitcheson
Her Majesty's Inspector.