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Mrs F Burgess
The Headteacher
Bilbrook Church of England (Controlled) Middle School
Bilbrook Road
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Dear Mrs Burgess

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 25 February 2009, 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 pupils and chair of governors who also spent time in conversation with me.

As a result of the inspection on 23 and 24 June 2008, the school was asked: to raise standards and achievement for all pupils, particularly in English and science; to use assessment information more precisely to plan work which challenges all pupils and is geared to their individual needs; to eliminate inconsistencies in the quality of marking; and, to develop the roles of middle leaders so that they are more rigorous in the monitoring and evaluation of standards in their subjects.

Since the last inspection, specialist teachers from the partner high school have been brought in to lead the science department and to teach science in Years 6, 7 and 8. A new teacher of mathematics has also been appointed. The number of pupils on roll has continued to decline sharply, mainly because of local demographic trends and pupil mobility. A further sharp decline in enrolment for the next academic year is forecast to place significant strain on the school's budget as it endeavours, despite its very small size, to offer specialist teaching in all subjects of the statutory curriculum.

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.

Sharper use of assessment information at all levels across the school has been central to this good improvement. Staff in all subjects are now monitoring pupils' progress carefully against clearly defined attainment targets. Pupils now learn well most of the time because teachers set out clearly the purpose of lesson activities



and establish clear criteria against which pupils can measure their success in developing their understanding and skills. Teachers' planning frequently takes account of the range of abilities in their classes, with particularly good recognition of the needs of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Work is often adapted successfully to provide greater challenge to the more able. Regular and detailed assessment of pupils' work helps teachers to track the progress of individual pupils and intervene with specific booster support where there is underachievement. The school's participation in national strategies, intended to sharpen and refine assessment procedures, has been very effective in improving its use of assessment information.

Pupils speak of their appreciation of the significant improvements in assessment and in teachers' marking since the last inspection. In most subjects, pupils have a clear understanding both of their target attainment levels and the levels at which they are working. They recognise how to improve their performance because teachers share assessment criteria with them. They are also increasingly involved in applying those criteria in the assessment of their own work and that of their peers. Pupils are therefore now thinking critically about their work and developing good evaluative skills and language. The school's marking policy is now applied with a good degree of consistency across the school and its use is rigorously monitored by senior and subject leaders. In applying this policy, teachers clearly and helpfully set out how well the work has achieved its objectives and what could be done to improve it further. The quality and effectiveness of marking is less consistent in science, where teachers from the partner school have less familiarity with the marking policy or are not always in school to follow up weak or incomplete work.

Subject leadership has been considerably strengthened because subject leaders are making much better use of performance data to monitor pupils' progress. They now undertake regular and rigorous checks of pupils' work, which allow them to produce detailed reports on the quality of provision. These reports also incorporate the results of lesson observations undertaken by themselves, senior managers and external consultants. Subject leaders therefore now have a comprehensive view of strengths and weaknesses of performance in their areas, although the translation of this knowledge into clear plans of action is underdeveloped.

Improved subject leadership and quality of provision have contributed to rising standards and achievement. National test results for Year 6 pupils in 2008 were markedly higher than those in 2007, except at the higher levels in science. Through this academic year, pupils have made particularly good progress in science, where they speak warmly of their great enjoyment of the more practical and investigative approach to the subject throughout the school. Higher attainers in science are especially relishing the extra challenge they are given. Pupils' attainment in science at Key Stage 3 is constrained by some weaknesses in basic knowledge, but the pupils are catching up rapidly. In English, pupils' rate of progress is speeding up in all areas as pupils respond to very clear guidance about how to improve their work. Improvement has been less rapid in reading in Year 7, but more structured approaches to the analysis of the meaning of text are having a positive effect in all

years. Improvements in literacy are supported by careful planning of opportunities to apply and extend pupils' literacy skills by teachers in some subjects, such as history, but not all. The school recognises the need to develop a whole-school literacy policy to ensure that opportunities are consistently sought to develop pupils' capabilities in reading, writing, speaking and listening across the curriculum.

The local authority statement of action offers a clear diagnosis of the needs of the school and sets out a coherent plan of action to help the school reach realistic and very clearly defined targets. Through the work of its consultants with staff in the classroom and through the regular monitoring, evaluation and review of the school's progress, the local authority's support has been well focused and effective. The School Improvement Partner has maintained effective scrutiny of the school's work. Links with the partner high school have been highly successful in improving the quality of provision and standards in science.

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

Ian Hodgkinson
Additional Inspector