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10 May 2013

Jacque Davies
Headteacher
Alternative Curriculum Service
The Porch
Richmond House
Bath Road
RG14 1QY

Dear Mrs Davies

Requires improvement monitoring inspection visit under section 8 of the Education act 2005 to Alternative Curriculum Service, West Berkshire

Following my visit to your school on 10 May 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings of my visit. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in February 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit I met with yourself, other senior leaders and members of the management committee (the body responsible for the centre's governance). I also toured the main site and made very brief visits to a number of lessons. I spoke with a representative of the local authority on the telephone and also evaluated the school's action plan and other documentation.

Context

Since the last inspection there have been important changes to the centre's relationship with the local authority. As is the case with other pupil referral units, on 1 April 2013 the management committee took over responsibility for the budget and for the recruitment and management of staff.

Main findings

The senior leadership team fully and honestly accept and acknowledge the judgements and weaknesses identified in the inspection report. They recognise, in particular, the need to make significant improvements to the way in which staff collect, analyse and use information about students' achievements. Much has already been done to improve this aspect of the centre's work. Leaders have visited other pupil referral units and mainstream schools to look at their practice, and have used what they found to develop a new and better system. Staff, for example, now record students' achievement more carefully when they first join the centre, and they assess their progress much more frequently during the year.

The centre is making good use of its newly delegated financial powers. The previous uncertainty over finances led to many temporary appointments and frequent changes in staff. The centre has now been able to make permanent appointments. This is helping to provide a more stable group of staff for leaders to work with and develop. Much good work is being done to improve teaching. Leaders have, for example, identified a range of features that they expect to see in every lesson. They are visiting lessons to ensure that all teachers are following these new guidelines. Teachers receive clear and detailed written feedback about the quality of their lessons.

Senior leaders have produced a specific action plan. The new plan is a useful working document, as it identifies important actions and activities, but it has some weaknesses. In particular, the plan is not very clear about:

- the intended impact of the different activities, for example the difference they will make to students' achievement
- how much will be achieved by different points in time, for example how much teaching will be good by the end of next term.

The work of the management committee is developing appropriately, in line with the changes that came into force nationally in April 2013. New members have been appointed and there is a better sub-committee structure; this is helping to even out the workload. The local authority has carried out a review of the management committee's work which members are currently reflecting on. However, members recognise that there is much to do if they are to offer the level of support and challenge that a highly effective school governing body provides. Members' roles in monitoring the school's work are too vague and are not identified clearly in the action plan.

Senior leaders and members of the management committee are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5

inspection. Following the visit to the school, HMI recommend that further action is taken to:

- develop the action plan so that it is clear about:
 - the intended impact of different activities (particularly their impact on teaching and student achievement)
 - how much should be achieved by different points during the year
- develop the work of the management committee, in particular by ensuring that:
 - members establish a clearer role in monitoring the centre's work and reviewing its progress against the action plan

Ofsted will continue to monitor the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The local authority is providing an extensive and diverse range of support. You have been proactive in identifying and requesting the kind of support that will be most valuable. You have also made a number of useful links with good and outstanding pupil referral units in the area.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the management committee, the Director of Children's Services for West Berkshire and the Education Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Christopher Russell
Her Majesty's Inspector