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Dear Mrs Steele

Ofsted 2014 15 survey inspection programme: schools' use of alternative provision

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 9–10 March 2015 to look at the school's use of alternative provision. During the visit I met with you, senior pastoral leaders and the pastoral manager who liaises with off-site providers. I also met students and visited the following providers that your students attend:

- Birmingham Metropolitan College, Erdington Skills Centre
- Make Learning Work, at the Baverstock Academy
- Silver Birch School.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

This letter briefly summarises our discussion at the end of the visit.

Strengths of this aspect of the school's work

- School leaders have a clear vision for the development of alternative provision with a view to improving outcomes for students and continuing to reduce exclusions from previously high levels. The development this year of Pope Francis House as a specialist internal unit where students are taught as a small group by specialist teachers is already successfully improving students' learning and behaviour. The school nonetheless uses off-site alternative provision for a small number of students where this is more appropriate to their needs or interests.

- Alternative provision is commissioned from a very small number of reputable providers across the city. The providers operate within quality and safeguarding frameworks inspected by Ofsted. They offer safe, well-appointed accommodation and specialist teaching in mathematics, English and vocational subjects.
- The local authority no longer has a role in commissioning or providing alternative provision. The school itself arranges the placements and negotiates service-level agreements with each provider.
- The pastoral manager has a detailed understanding of the backgrounds and needs of each student and a well-developed knowledge of provision available locally. Placements are therefore well-matched to the academic and personal needs of students, taking account for example of vocational interests, proximity to home, and bespoke mentoring needs, as well as provision for English, mathematics and a balanced curriculum.
- The school gives providers exceptionally detailed information on the behavioural, emotional, social and learning needs of the students, and this enables a very clear appraisal of the risk associated with the student attending each placement. The referral documentation is not, however, as specific about careers interests or aspirations. Each provider has its own detailed child protection policies and procedures, and staff and managers at the providers are very clear about how this dovetails with the school's own arrangements. As a result, staff at both the school and the provider are very well informed about incidents affecting the students' well-being.
- Providers feel very well supported by the school. They value the ready access by telephone and email to school leaders and pastoral staff. They also value the regular, usually weekly, visits by the school pastoral manager to check with students and staff that they are happy with the placement and resolve any problems.
- Nearly all students attend off-site provision full time, and providers offer a well-balanced academic and vocational curriculum adapted to levels suited to students' abilities. Similarly, students in Pope Francis House attend the provision full-time and follow a broad curriculum, including provision for citizenship and religious education which address personal, social and political issues of much relevance to students' later life. However, students in Pope Francis House have not been sufficiently well-prepared to enable them to fully sustain planned work experience placements.
- Attainment and progress in English and mathematics for Year 11 students on alternative provision in 2014 was less than expected and weakest in mathematics. However, the school's analysis and evidence from lessons and students' books show that current cohorts have begun to make accelerated progress since attending alternative provision. This is linked to students' generally improved behaviour, attitudes and attendance, and to

the focus in all providers on securing progress in English and mathematics. Students themselves say that they are learning more in small classes where teachers and assistants can give more direct support to individual needs. The school recognises that it would be beneficial to begin such intervention earlier.

- Students are working to achieve a range of useful academic and vocational qualifications. Current students are thinking clearly about careers and college options, and this reflects well on the advice and guidance they are receiving in school and from the providers. This is an improving picture from last year's cohort, where there were few discernible pathways in specific occupational areas from alternative provision, and a minority became NEET, meaning that they did not enter or sustain further education, employment or training.
- The pastoral manager's frequent visits to providers enable him to gain a good general understanding of students' degrees of engagement in their settings. This enables school leaders to intervene and change provision if a placement is not yielding discernible improvements in attendance and behaviour. However, the detailed tracking of measurable improvements in students' academic progress, attendance, behaviour and employability skills is generally a weakness for offsite provision, and the quality of reporting on these aspects varies widely between providers. This restricts the ability of managers to clearly evaluate impact and value for money, and for students to have a clear summative record of their progress. This contrasts with the detailed tracking of all outcomes for students in the Pope Francis House internal provision. School staff and leaders also do not check on the quality of teaching and learning on their visits to offsite providers.
- Students have highly positive views of alternative provision, both on-site and in the off-site providers. In particular, they noted how their learning, behaviour and attendance had improved because of their different relationships with staff and other pupils in the smaller settings. Some students had originally come to the school on managed moves following exclusions from other local schools, and value the chance they have been given to gain some valuable qualifications by re-engaging in learning. 'They never gave up on me', said one. 'I can't miss this opportunity I've been given to get a trade.'

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- continuing to improve academic and personal development outcomes, and reduce the number of students who become NEET by:
 - sharpening further the evaluation of the impact of offsite alternative provision by getting regular, clear and detailed reports from providers on all aspects of students' development, including their achievement, personal development and employability skills

- visiting provision to monitor teaching, learning and students' progress
 - working with providers to strengthen tracking of and support for careers and college destinations when students leave Year 11
 - further developing the on-site provision to allow earlier intervention with students at risk of disengagement prior to Year 11.
- improving the preparedness of students in Pope Francis House to enable them to settle in to their work experience placements.

Yours sincerely

Ian Hodgkinson
Her Majesty's Inspector