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Mr K Defter
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Dear Mr Defter

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 5 – 6 May 2015 to look at the academy's use of alternative provision. During the visit I met with you, members of the senior leadership team, the heads of house and the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO). I also met students and visited the following providers that your students attend: The Oakfield Project, Riverside and The Shed.

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

- The use of alternative provision for students at The Commonweal School is part of a well-considered process that takes students' needs and preferences fully into account.
- There are two strands to the provision. A group of 40 students in Years 10 and 11 attend college for one day a week. They study subjects that they have chosen such as engineering, health and social care and hair and beauty. These vocational options replace two GCSE courses. There is a rigorous selection process and the courses form part of a pathway to further study or the workplace. Students do not miss important subjects when they are at college.

- Other students attend a range of full- or part-time alternative provision or work experience placements. Some of these students have particular social, emotional or behavioural difficulties that affect their attendance and learning. Others are students who attend your resourced provisions for students with physical disabilities or learning disabilities.
- All students remain on Commonweal's roll and their results at the end of Year 11 are included in the school's overall results.
- All alternative provision is either in a maintained school or college or is commissioned and quality assured by the local authority. In partnership with three other local secondary schools, you oversee and part-fund the work of one of the providers and commission six places each year. Providers all have recent and relevant training in safeguarding that is refreshed regularly.
- All premises that I visited were safe and suitable for their purpose.
- You make sure that providers receive comprehensive information about each student as part of the process of selecting the right placement. This includes information about academic achievement, personal and social development and any particular circumstances. Child protection information is shared as necessary. Providers felt well informed and prepared.
- Parents and students are fully involved in choosing the most appropriate placement. All visit beforehand and many parents visit regularly during the placement.
- Aspirations for all students are high. Both Oakfield and Riverside (where students are placed full time) make sure that students have the chance to complete their GCSE courses, including in English and mathematics. Last year, seven out of eight students gained GCSE passes in both English and mathematics by the end of Year 11. This year all seven students are expected to do so. Because of their circumstances, not all of these students have made the progress expected nationally since the end of primary school. However, records show that most begin to make much better progress and narrow the gap on where they should be once they start their placements. Students also have the chance to take their examinations again if they wish. Several have improved their grades. Students attending college are studying courses at GCSE equivalent levels.
- Most, but not all, students' attendance improves at alternative providers, as do their attitudes to learning.
- Providers send regular, detailed, evaluative reports about how well each student is doing, including in their academic achievement, attendance and personal and social development. Colleges provide information every term about progress towards target grades.

- Commonweal staff make regular visits to providers to see students and to discuss their progress. Providers welcomed these visits. They said that relationships with Commonweal staff are positive and that communication is good. Your staff do not carry out formal observations of teaching and learning on their visits, although they have done in the past. However, the progress students make is carefully checked.
- Students spoke positively about their experiences of alternative provision. Students from the resourced provisions enjoy their work experience placements. College students could see clearly how what they are studying at college will benefit them after the age of 16. One student is looking forward to returning to Commonweal to study A levels in the sixth form.
- The governing body receives comprehensive reports on the attainment and progress of all students, including those attending alternative provision. Governing body members have visited one of the providers.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- including summary information about improvements in students' attendance, personal and social development and employability skills in the reports on the outcomes for students attending alternative providers. This will help governors to evaluate the full impact of their spending decisions. It will also help to celebrate students' successes more widely.

My concerns about the registration status of one of the providers you are using have been reported to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Linda McGill
Her Majesty's Inspector