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Ms H McAndrew
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Dear Ms McAndrew

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 2-3 June 2015 to look at the pupil referral unit's use of alternative provision. During the visit I met with you and other senior leaders. I also met students and visited the following independent alternative providers that your students attend: Edstart; Manchester Young Lives; Music Stuff; The Manchester Settlement.

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 pupil referral unit (PRU) commissions alternative provision in order to provide full-time placements for students who either have been identified as at risk of permanent exclusion or who have been permanently excluded. This is part of the local authority's strategy to reduce the proportion of fixed and permanent exclusions across the borough. The PRU also commissions full-time places with alternative providers, for students who, for various other reasons, may not be accessing mainstream education. They use seven alternative providers who are all registered as independent special schools.
- Leaders of the PRU have worked closely with the local authority's procurement team to ensure their commissioning of alternative provision follows robust and transparent procedures. This has been effective in

ensuring the providers commissioned are financially secure, meet the PRU's minimum standards with regards to facilities and the quality of provision and, above all, provide a safe environment in which students are motivated to make progress.

- Leaders are effective in meeting the PRU's aim to re-engage and re-integrate students who attend alternative provision back into mainstream education. Almost all students who attend alternative provision remain on the roll of their home school. The PRU's own data show that a small proportion of these students return to their home school or are placed in an alternative secondary school. The large proportion of students who attend alternative provision are integrated successfully into post-16 education or training. These are strong outcomes for this group of students.
- Leaders have established a solid foundation by which to ensure the alternative provision available is closely matched to the specific needs of students. All providers offer a core curriculum based around the delivery of English, mathematics and science at GCSE or Functional Skills level. A range of other qualifications are also being followed for example, BTEC sport, BTEC health and social care, information and communication technology at Foundation Skills level and Art at GCSE level. Leaders use providers' distinctiveness, in terms of style of delivery and additional subjects taught, to ensure that students begin to close their gaps in learning well.
- All of the students I spoke to said they were making progress both academically and in terms of their personal, social and behavioural development. This view is corroborated by the PRU's own data.
- Although the PRU's tracking system is not yet used to analyse, in detail, the specific academic and non-academic progress of every student who participates in alternative provision, evidence shows this group of students make good progress in their personal development. The PRU's own records show that the vast majority of students who join alternative provision are at a high risk of permanent exclusion, have high levels of absence, hold poor behaviour records and are unlikely to achieve academic qualifications. However, last year a high proportion of Year 11 students completed their compulsory education and progressed on to college or training having gained qualifications in English and mathematics at an appropriate level while attending alternative provision. Almost all of the students who attend alternative provision currently have improved their behaviour and attendance since joining, all are following relevant qualifications and a small minority have already achieved accreditation in some units of study.
- Very few of the students I spoke to felt that they had been given a choice in which alternative placement they attended. However, all of these students said they would not change placement if given the option. All of the students said they had benefitted from the strong relationships built

up between adults and students at the provision. The students said they had settled quickly and attended more regularly than they did before. The students agreed that they were now able to manage their own behaviour more often than before they joined the 'project' and that this contributes to them succeeding in lessons. All of the students had a clear pathway for their next steps, something which they said they did not have before attending alternative provision.

- The quality of accommodation used by the alternative providers visited varies in terms of style, location and size. However, all the buildings visited are adequate and provide a non-threatening atmosphere in which students were observed to be relaxed and comfortable. In each of the provisions visited students were observed, on the whole, taking part in lessons and contributing to their own learning.
- The safeguarding procedures of all those providers visited are robust because they are linked closely to the PRU's own policies and procedures. However, scrutiny of providers' records of safeguarding checks identified the omission of the use of the Secretary of State's prohibition from teaching checks in all cases.
- The quality of the information and training given to the providers and the extent to which this supports them in supporting the students is a key strength of the PRU. Leaders of the PRU ensure that key policies and procedures, devised and amended by the PRU, are shared with all alternative providers. In many cases providers adopt these policies. Consequently, there is often little to distinguish, in terms of procedures, between those provisions managed directly by the PRU and independent provisions. Also, key training such as in the safeguarding of children and the teaching of English and mathematics along with access to teacher networking forums, for example, are provided by PRU leaders for all providers. Providers spoken to, without exception, feel they are supported well by the PRU. In turn, this ensures that all students who attend alternative provision are treated equally.
- Although there is strong evidence to support the view that students make progress, both academically and personally and socially, while they attend alternative provision, outcomes in terms of sustained post-16 placements are patchy. For example, the number of students who attended alternative provision and then were not in education, employment or training rose from five to seven in the six months between September 2014 and March 2015. This indicates that some students are not gaining sufficient skills and resilience to enable them to be successful post-16.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- sharpening the PRU's use of its own data as a means of evaluating the academic and personal and social progress of each student who attends

alternative provision, based on their specific starting point and their reasons for attending

- evaluating each provider's success in terms of the outcomes of individuals and groups of students in order to judge the overall impact of, along with the value for money given by, each alternative provision
- working closely with leaders of post-16 provisions to ensure students who attend alternative provision have an equal opportunity to succeed in their next step beyond school, by ensuring placements available are appropriate and matched well to students' needs and skills
- ensuring that all independent alternative providers take immediate action to update their records of safeguarding checks in light of the latest Department for Education statutory guidance 'Keeping children safe in education' April 2014, paragraphs 57 and 66.

Yours sincerely

Drew Crawshaw

Her Majesty's Inspector