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14 December 2015

Mr Nick Stanton
Headteacher
Stroud and Cotswold Alternative Provision School
Ryeleaze Road
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Dear Mr Stanton

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Stroud and Cotswold Alternative Provision School

Following my visit to your school on 1 December 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. 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. Please pass my thanks on to your staff, pupils and to the members of the management committee I met during the visit. Could you also thank the pupils and staff I shared tea, toast and crumpets with in the morning, an experience I thoroughly enjoyed.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in June 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, other senior leaders and members of staff, two members of the management committee (one the headteacher of a partner secondary school) and two representatives of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. Lessons were visited with the headteacher. During these visits the inspector looked at records of pupils' progress and at their work, and talked with them about it. The school's self-evaluation and rapid improvement plan were evaluated.

Context

A reorganisation of alternative provision in Gloucestershire was instigated in April 2015. At this time, an executive headteacher and a management committee with oversight of all three maintained alternative provision schools in Gloucestershire took up their roles. The operational headteacher for the Stroud and Cotswold Alternative Provision School, responsible for the two centres that make up this provision, also took up his post at this time.

Together, the two centres provide places for primary and secondary pupils permanently excluded from schools in this part of Gloucestershire, places for pupils at risk of permanent exclusion and short-term places for pupils who need support with improving their behaviour. The centres also provide places for other pupils in need of school places and a small number excluded from the other alternative provision schools. The Belle Vue Centre is for pupils of primary age and those from the early secondary age range. The Ryeleaze Centre is used mainly for pupils in Years 10 and 11. Most of the pupils in the Ryeleaze Centre remain in the school until they leave at the end of Year 11.

The school works with a range of other providers to ensure that pupils, particularly those in Key Stage 4, have a curriculum that meets their needs well and prepares them for the next stage in their education or training.

Main findings

The headteacher provides the school with outstanding leadership. He gives a strong sense of direction and provides a calm and reassuring presence. As a result, staff share a much clearer sense of purpose, and their morale and confidence have risen. The roles of the two lead teachers are better defined and understood; they provide the headteacher with good support. While the review of governance is not complete, the management committee is already much better equipped to provide a good balance of support and challenge to the school's leaders. The systems for monitoring the progress and attendance of pupils are much tighter. The school's rapid improvement plan shows that senior leaders fully understand what needs to be done, and how to achieve the rapid and sustained improvements required. As a result of the changes made and actions taken by the headteacher, the school is well on track to becoming a good school.

There is an intensive focus in everything the school does in preparing pupils well for their next steps: return to their mainstream school; transfer to another school or provision better suited to their needs; or, for those staying in the school until the end of Year 11, progression to the most appropriate post-16 programme. Headteachers in partner schools, those buying in to the provision and other schools that use the service value highly the flexible approach adopted by the headteacher to find the most appropriate solution for individual pupils, rather than offering set packages. The effectiveness of the school's approach is seen in, for example, the

success in re-integrating many pupils back into their schools and in all those leaving Year 11 finding suitable post-16 places, with almost all still on these programmes a year later.

When pupils join the school, an intensive analysis is undertaken to provide a very good depth of understanding of their personal circumstances. The analysis includes, for example, their current levels of achievement, social skills, behaviour and any potential barriers to their progress. This enables staff to carefully plan an individual programme and monitor each pupil's all-round progress from this starting point highly effectively. The existing system, where each pupil's behaviour, effort and learning is graded for each lesson and reviewed at the end of each day, has been refined by the headteacher. The end-of-day meetings are more structured to plan the next day carefully, while not losing the strong sense of attention to, and care for, individual pupils' all-round needs. The headteacher, together with the lead teachers and others, reviews each individual pupil at the end of the week. These arrangements ensure extremely rigorous monitoring of individual pupils' progress and evaluation of the effectiveness of the support provided. The headteacher, working with the management committee and support from the local authority school intervention adviser, has identified the need to use this more effectively as management information to evaluate and demonstrate the impact of the provision in achieving its objectives.

The range of staff who work in each of the centres – teachers, teaching assistants, learning mentors and other adults – combine their skills well to form very cohesive and effective teams. There is stronger unity of purpose across the two centres. The staff have the skills and expertise to support well the diverse range of needs of pupils who attend the centres. The headteacher has now given them more confidence. While many pupils present challenging behaviours, they trust the adults who work with them and appreciate how they help them overcome the difficulties that led to them being placed in the school. The skills of all staff have been enhanced and they feel more valued as a result of the professional development the headteacher has instigated, such as the level 3 therapy training that a group of support staff attend. The training has given these staff deeper insights into, and the skills to overcome, the barriers that prevent some pupils from making progress to enable them to successfully return to their mainstream school or transfer to another school. As one member of staff put it: 'We knew we were doing a good job, but now we know why we are.'

The procedures for recording and analysing attendance information are now secure. The attendance of all pupils in the school is better than it was before they transferred and, in many cases, dramatically so. Attendance overall is much higher than for this type of school nationally. The number of fixed-term exclusions has fallen to fewer than half the number a year ago.

The headteacher, lead teachers and other staff work hard to involve parents in deciding the best course of action for their children, and they are largely very successful. They keep parents well informed about their children's progress and involve them in discussions about dealing with any difficulties they face.

Pupils in Years 10 and 11 follow a curriculum with a core and a range of options that are matched well to the pupils' strengths, interests and aspirations. The curriculum is instrumental in improving pupils' attitudes, attendance and achievement. The links with other providers are used well to enhance what the school can provide. Recently, six pupils spent time on a vocational programme in an outstanding local independent learning provider. At the end of Year 11, all were all offered post-16 places by this provider. This is testament to the effectiveness of the school's approach and how well it prepares pupils to move on.

A great deal of attention has been given to ensuring that pupils are safe. Staff manage difficult behaviour well and sensitively. This calms the situation, and causes minimum disruption and upset to others. A common message of 'ready, respectful, safe' is becoming well established. Social time is managed carefully and well; pupils are given a range of activities and games to create a calmer atmosphere and diffuse tensions.

External support

The school is supported well by the local authority through the frequent meetings of the project group. This group was initially set up when the school was considered to be a cause for concern by the local authority. It has been given a sharper focus after the school was judged to require improvement by the June 2015 inspection. The meetings focus on the school's progress against the rapid improvement plan.

The arrangements introduced by the local authority from April 2015 to bring the three alternative provision schools under one executive headteacher and one management committee also ensure good mutual support across the three alternative provision schools. The headteacher also works closely with headteachers from partner schools as well as other schools that make use of the service. He attends meetings of headteachers within the local authority to ensure that the profile of the school is high and to ensure that the provision matches the needs of other schools well.

Ofsted may carry out further monitoring inspections and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Management Committee, the Director of Children's Services for Gloucestershire and the Regional Schools Commissioner. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

James Sage
Her Majesty's Inspector