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Miss Kay Kelly
Acting Headteacher
Alternative Centre for Education
McMullen House
Yarm Road
Darlington
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DL1 1ED

Dear Miss Kelly

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ALTERNATIVE CENTRE FOR EDUCATION

Following my visit with John Farrow AI and Christine Inkster HMI to your school on 6 and 7 November 2007, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in October 2006. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children's Services at Darlington.

Yours sincerely

Tom Grieveson

Her Majesty's Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF ALTERNATIVE CENTRE FOR EDUCATION

Report from the third monitoring inspection: 6 and 7 November 2007

Evidence

Inspectors visited a range of lessons at both Key Stages 3 and 4 and observed students working at Darlington College and at Eastbourne Church of England Academy. Registration procedures were monitored, documents were scrutinised and interviews conducted with the acting headteacher, the headteacher and deputy headteacher designate, staff members, students and local authority (LA) representatives. Informal discussions took place with students and members of staff. Examples of students' work were examined during lessons.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection, the LA has appointed a new headteacher and deputy headteacher to take up their posts in January 2008. Both have been granted partial release by their existing employers in order to spend one or two days per week at the centre. The acting headteacher remains responsible for day-to-day management. The number of temporary teaching staff has been further reduced following recent permanent appointments. Building work is well under way to provide remodelled accommodation at Rise Carr, with completion scheduled for March 2008. The new management board, involving all seven secondary headteachers in the authority, has now begun its work.

Achievement and standards

Standards remain inadequate overall, but more students are making improved progress in lessons because an increasing number have access to an appropriate curriculum which better supports their needs. In addition, most teachers are more successful in promoting students' social and emotional development and this is helping students to confront their own feelings and emotional difficulties which have often led to behavioural problems in the past. Alternative vocational provision at Key Stage 4 continues to enable many older students to gain appropriate high-status vocational qualifications which they clearly value. Many of these students also develop the attitudes and skills that will support their future training and employment prospects. However, for those older Key Stage 4 students who are taught predominately at the centre, progress remains inadequate because the curriculum does not sufficiently interest or engage them and they do not value what it offers.

Personal development and well-being

The personal development and well-being of most students continue to show satisfactory improvement overall. Attendance figures have improved further, particularly for older students receiving alternative vocational education and younger

centre-based students. Improvements in behaviour are reflected in fewer fixed-term exclusions overall and particularly for younger students at Key Stage 3.

At Key Stage 3 behaviour in lessons is mainly satisfactory and sometimes good. More students remain on task when working on their own or in small groups. Most show a willingness to respond appropriately to the teachers' encouragement and directions. During the visit no instances of unacceptable or abusive language were heard.

Most Key Stage 4 students following vocational courses at Darlington College display good attitudes and commitment to their studies. They are proud of their achievements and have realistic ambitions for their future. Most are able to reflect on the benefits of following courses where they can assume more responsibility for their own learning and behaviour.

In contrast, the personal development and well-being of many Key Stage 4 students based at the centre remain inadequate. These older students have low self-esteem and often direct aggressive and abusive language towards members of staff or other students in a casual and recurrent manner. This behaviour distracts other students from their work and interrupts the pace and focus of their learning. Despite these entrenched difficulties, relationships between some older students and staff are improving and this is helping the students acquire attitudes and behaviour which are more conducive to learning. This is most apparent in the lessons where the students see direct relevance to their own lives and circumstances.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in October 2006:

- Take action to improve attendance so that pupils can take advantage of the learning opportunities available – satisfactory
- Take action to manage pupils' behaviour more effectively so that exclusions are reduced – satisfactory

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning has continued to improve. It is now consistently good at Key Stage 3. An increasing proportion is now also good at Key Stage 4 although here it remains satisfactory overall. The quality of teaching and learning which students experience at Darlington College remains good.

The appointment of permanent teachers has promoted greater consistency in the way teachers plan and organise lessons and manage students' behaviour. Lesson objectives are clear and mainly well focused, providing an appropriate context for learning. Activities mostly meet the needs of students, often because of the good individual support provided by teaching assistants. Teachers are using a broader range of learning strategies and resources to interest students, including a good use of the centre's facilities for information and communication technology. These improvements are leading to more students being compliant and willing to engage in learning activities, with an increasing number showing a genuine interest in their studies.

Most teachers and teaching assistants show a good understanding of students' social and emotional requirements. Staff remain calm and purposeful when encouraging reluctant students to take part in activities; younger students in particular respond to this approach and join in. Consequently, more students remain on task for extended periods and this is helping them to increase the rate of progress which they make.

Improvements continue to be made to the curriculum at both key stages. At Key Stage 3 the additional focus on meeting students' social and emotional needs more directly through the curriculum is effective. At Key Stage 4 students are being offered an improved range of appropriately accredited courses, some of which are now being offered to students educated predominantly at the Key Stage 4 centre. This is a very recent development for this vulnerable group of students and, while it represents a significant improvement in overall provision, it is too early to judge its impact. In contrast, those following alternative provision, and particularly those students undertaking full-time vocational courses at Darlington College, are now accessing a curriculum that fully meets their aspirations and supports their learning and personal development. The most recent information suggests that there has been a sharp fall in the number of students not entering education, employment or training on leaving the centre.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in October 2006:

- Eliminate weaknesses in teaching, by introducing an accurate assessment system and raising teachers' low expectations of pupils' achievement. – satisfactory
- Develop an appropriate curriculum. –
 - good progress for students at Key Stage 3
 - satisfactory and often good progress for students following alternative educational pathways at Key Stage 4
 - inadequate but improving progress for predominantly centre-based Key Stage 4 students

Leadership and management

The quality of leadership and management at the centre has continued to improve. Day-to-day management by the acting headteacher is good and the robust drive to tackle the centre's weaknesses has been maintained. Strategic planning for the move to new premises is progressing well. A growing number of students are being placed into mainstream settings or alternative placements and more are being identified for re-integration into mainstream schools. Consequently, a greater proportion of students are making better progress. While these changes are welcome, further improvement is still required to enable older students to achieve more; too many are still not benefiting from a curriculum which meets their needs and prepares them for life after school.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in October 2006.

- Ensure that the centre has the effective leadership and management to make the improvements necessary to raise pupils' achievements and the overall quality of education. – satisfactory

External support

Effective LA support has continued and is increasingly proportionate to the centre's strengthening capacity to manage its own affairs. Support to prepare the students and staff for the move to the new site is good. Work at Rise Carr is well advanced and on schedule for opening in March 2008. The centre's management board is now fully operational. Support to attract and appoint permanent members of staff has been well managed and has greatly aided the centre in improving the quality and relevance of its provision.