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Ms C Lillis
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Lillis

Ofsted survey inspection programme: Curriculum Innovation

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 02 November 2007 to look at your school's curriculum and how it contributes to standards and achievement, teaching and learning and inclusion.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports may list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text. Feedback letters are published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made include interviews with staff, meetings with students, lesson observations and scrutiny of relevant documentation.

The enthusiasm and sense of purpose shared by staff and students indicate that the impact of recent curriculum innovations on teaching and learning, achievement and standards and inclusion have been at least good and, in some instances, outstanding.

Achievement and standards

The students all enter school with levels of attainment significantly below national levels. Additionally, students have often been reluctant or unable to previously engage fully with learning. Given this, their progress in the lessons seen on this visit was good and in the off-site experience was outstanding. The way the curriculum is presented to the students re-engages their interest in learning; they see the relevance of improving their basic skills and the need to work towards external accreditation. There are good examples of individual

students making remarkable progress in their reading. In one lesson, they showed good concentration and understanding of a complex poem.

Teaching and learning

Teaching is well supported by a range of adults who know and understand the students very well. The student-centred approach in school makes it a special place to both learn and teach. Mutual respect is high on the agenda: its strength is based on trusting relationships and a genuine concern for promoting high individual achievement. The innovative way the staffing structure has developed contributes to the school's success. Vocational opportunities taught by experienced and well qualified staff in their own area of expertise contribute significantly to students' learning. All members of staff work well together and value one another's strengths: this has a positive impact on how the students behave and learn.

Curriculum

The defining principle for curriculum innovation is a personalised approach to learning - through careful grouping of students with agreed priorities, a wide and flexible range of options, clear and manageable personal targets and exceptionally strong care and guidance that goes beyond the school gates. This is set within a creative approach to planning the curriculum which is different to mainstream schools but covers a similar content. Areas of experience are defined under personal headings, for example, My Passport (English and mathematics); My World (humanities), so the students receive their curricular entitlement but do not see it as traditionally blocked timetabled lessons. Students as a whole value the school's breadth and flexibility of curriculum provision.

At the heart of the planning process are flexibility and a commitment to meet individual needs. This takes account of the students' personal circumstances at any one time.

The curriculum is strengthened further by an ambitious programme of opportunities outside normal school hours. A range of activities are offered outside of the school day with high attendance not only by students from school but within the local community. Additionally, residential experiences are regularly planned by the students and staff including exciting trips to Europe and a recent trip to Egypt. This shows the commitment to widening the students' horizons and ensuring the curriculum is the means to broaden experiences. The curriculum at Ian Mikardo School enables students to take the path to success – a first for many of them.

Leadership and management

You provide exceptional leadership based on a deep personal commitment, shown through in-depth understanding of the needs of the students and by

establishing an ethos where all members of the school community are treated equally, regardless of their race, gender or disability. The students are committed to the school, valuing the personal support and range of opportunities available to them. The drive to innovate within the curriculum and other mutually supportive areas of school life permeates to most staff.

There is significant investment in personal and professional development, with time ring-fenced every day for sharing what has worked well and where improvements need to be made. All staff are encouraged to participate in every aspect of school life which plays an important role within the local community. Ways in which to monitor the impact of this significant investment of time and resources are not currently systematic, although positive outcomes are clearly observable. A key strength of the school is its evident cohesiveness with no discernable divide between teaching and other support staff, middle management and the leadership team. The multi-professional approach to the curriculum and work of the school requires skilful management and investment of time- all done to a high standard.

Inclusion

The school's differentiated pathways and range of options successfully include and support all students with a range of needs. Those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities progress well and their successes are properly celebrated. Targeted, specialist support is consistently given, to promote independence and is complemented by exceptional partnerships with external agencies.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included ensuring that:

- the impact of the investment in the curriculum, teaching and learning is systematically monitored.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop your curriculum.

Yours sincerely

Eileen Visser
Her Majesty's Inspector