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Mr A Colley
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Colley

Ofsted survey: good practice in capturing the user voice

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 11 March 2009 to look at work on capturing the user voice.

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.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: lesson observations, learning walks, meeting the school council, discussions with students and staff, and scrutiny of documentation.

Features of good practice observed

- The school's overarching vision and strategy for user voice and engagement, described in the school development plan, is firmly embedded across the school. It is encapsulated by the head teacher: "If relationships are right, user voice manifests itself in engagement". In a learning environment of mutual trust and exceptional relationships, school managers listen to student opinion at all levels of development and planning.
- The culture for students to express individual views and shape activities is strong. Students are involved in strategic decision making and have participated in staff interviews, most recently in the appointment of the incoming head teacher.
- The school council is well established, democratically elected and provides a very strong voice for students of all ages. It is impressively led and managed by its elected council leader. The hierarchical structure, comprising year councils which feed onto the executive council ensures that meetings are not too unwieldy and that opportunity is provided for all to air their views. Students are very clear that the school council is the most effective way to express opinion and shape change in the school.

- The school's transition procedures are a model of good practice which set the scene very well for the development of user voice throughout the school. The key is 'talking and listening'. Induction is built around incoming student views and outcomes are used effectively to shape school practice.
- The strong inclusive ethos of the school is built on very good knowledge of individual needs and strong pastoral support. The development of applied learning and flexibility of approach enable students to personalise their Key Stage 4 courses and assess their own progress. Those most at risk are well supported by the nurture team, and specialist targeted support enables the views of more vulnerable students to be heard.
- Mentoring and personal tuition packages are developed in partnership with students. These meet needs across the full ability range, support self-esteem and confidence, and impact positively on educational achievement and personal development. For example students in the 'lilac list' group feel that it is a 'privilege' to be included for personal tuition.
- Focus groups such as the bullying and eco teams provide further opportunity for students to express their views and opinions. These groups are increasingly being informed by wider student input through the school's developing virtual learning environment.
- Students are provided with extensive opportunities to take leadership roles and make decisions. They serve as prefects, volunteer bully-buddies, mentors, subject partners, school council or eco representatives.
- The impact of student voice is high within the school and the community, for example in changes to the school environment, the development of vocational summer courses which enhance the Year 11 curriculum, and health and safety arrangements on a site adjacent to the school.
- Effective use is made of external agencies, the local college and links such as the local authority Youth Parliament to enhance the school's provision and the learning experiences of all students.

Areas for development

- No areas for development were identified.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop the user voice in the school.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Linda Clare
Additional Inspector