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Mr M Whitby
Principal
The Alternative Centre for Education
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Dear Mr Whitby

Ofsted subject survey: identifying good practice in art and design and in science

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during the visit by Christine Jones HMI and myself on 11 May 2009 to look at the impact of your work through subjects on meeting the needs of individual pupils.

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 discussions with members of staff and pupils, observation of lessons, scrutiny of work and analysis of key documentation provided for the visit.

Features of good practice observed

- The pupils make outstanding progress in their behaviour and attitudes towards learning in art and design and in science. They behave well in both subjects because they enjoy the practical tasks which are given prominence in their lessons. They like getting started quickly in using practical equipment or materials as was evident in secondary science when investigating a local pond and garden area. In a primary art lesson pupils responded very well when handling clay, moving briskly from drawing to clay reliefs based on portraits of their friends.
- For many pupils, their aspirations and confidence are low when they arrive. The staff counter this strongly by being enthusiastic, having high expectations of what can be achieved and by relentlessly communicating these to the pupils so that they begin to share them.

- In many lessons, clearly structured activities are the key to success. This addresses the difficulty many pupils have in sustaining their focus on learning. Staff are adept at linking learning back to previous lessons and at ensuring that activities within each lesson build logically on each other.
- The curriculum is well planned to broaden pupils' experiences of the world. Through the science curriculum a student was learning to relate the idea of evolution to the present day. In art and design many pupils have not visited a gallery before or looked closely at how creative practitioners respond to the world around them so the provision of such experiences does much to make learning more relevant.
- The system for tracking the pupils' academic and social development is outstanding. Current attainment and targets are recorded regularly. This enables the curriculum and individual lessons to be adapted to meet pupils' needs, taking account of the complexity of the part-time programmes of many pupils and the sporadic attendance of some.
- The pupils have many opportunities to reflect on the progress they are making. These opportunities are suitably regular and are made against measurable short-term steps. Nevertheless many pupils find this one of the hardest aspects of their learning because of a legacy of past failure.
- Teachers and teaching assistants work very well as a team. Communication ahead of teaching is excellent so that the role for each adult is clear. Their responses to the pupils' behaviour are consistent and classroom routines are emphasised and reinforced systematically.
- The staff are skilled in managing pupils' behaviour. They employ a wide range of approaches tailored to individual pupils' needs or addressing an issue common to a group such as poor organisational or listening skills.
- Relationships between staff and pupils are positive because staff affirm good work and behaviour while also supporting pupils in accepting the consequences where they behave badly. As a result there is a positive atmosphere for learning in subject lessons and pupils make significant progress in engaging with adults and each other.
- The leadership of the subject in each phase shares the overall vision of the school to improve pupils' behaviour while getting pupils' learning back on track. Whole-school systems such as the monitoring of pupils' progress and the management of pupils' behaviour are consistently applied through the subjects.
- Day-to-day management of resources is effective in response to pupils' varying needs. Staff respond flexibly to the ever changing demands of the young people and are skilled in adapting resources and planned activities to current day-to-day situations.
- Communication with external partners is effective in maintaining teachers' awareness of curriculum developments. In particular the strong links with local partner primary and secondary schools are valuable in updating teachers' skills while ensuring continuity of provision for the students.

Areas for development

- Sharpen the monitoring of subject provision across the different phases and sites to identify common areas requiring improvement and to share best practice.
- Improve progress in art and design by challenging pupils to think more independently about the next steps in their work.
- Identify and prioritise the aspects of science that are most important and relevant to the students and develop these through a stronger focus on science skills and scientific enquiry.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop initiatives in and through art and design at 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

Stephen Long
Her Majesty's Inspector

Christine Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector