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Ms S Lalis
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Dear Ms Lalis

Ofsted 2013 14 survey inspection programme: schools' use of alternative provision

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 12 and 13 June 2014 to look at the pupil referral unit's use of alternative provision. During the visit I met with you, the deputy headteacher, the programme manager for alternative provision, two headteachers from the Dacorum Partnership, five other representatives from schools in the partnership, and the vocational and work experience coordinator. I also met students and visited the following providers that your students attend: Lifestyle Studios, The Princes Trust and Sparks.

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.

This letter briefly summarises our discussion at the end of the visit.

Strengths of this aspect of the pupil referral unit's work

- The unit requires alternative providers to implement its policies and procedures for managing students' behaviour and for child protection. This works well to maintain consistency for students throughout their week and helps to promote high standards for students' welfare when they are off-site or with different staff. However, the child protection policy lacks sufficient details about the potential vulnerability of students who have alternative provision.
- Students and alternative providers benefit from the well-established role of learning mentors, which is common for all students who attend the unit.

The learning mentors play an important role in exchanging information, preparing students for placements so that they settle well and attend well, and making sure that students' concerns or worries are addressed quickly.

- For most students, the English and mathematics teaching takes place at the unit and not on alternative provision.
- The unit has a clear rationale for commissioning alternative provision and for the selection of the students who use it. Students, parents and providers must commit to the duration of the course and both are expected to work through any setbacks along the way with a view to developing students' resilience. With this in mind, students are selected because of their readiness to take full advantage of this approach.
- A deliberately lengthy process takes place before students attend alternative providers. Linked to the point above, the process aims to identify suitable students well in advance.
- The unit has a flexible approach to alternative provision. They use a small number of providers, which they find and manage themselves. The list changes annually according to how providers have met the needs of students in the past, how up-to-date they are in their vocational expertise and whether they match the interests of the next cohort.
- Students benefit from being on the roll of their home school as well as on the roll of the unit. Joint responsibilities between schools and the unit make sure that students feel well supported and looked after. It also means that staff at the schools and the unit actively work in partnership to make sure that placements are successful.
- Students view alternative provision as a positive choice that is to their advantage. They stick with their choices and rise to the expectation that they have to attend school or the unit for all other parts of their week. This supports students to achieve well in academic studies. Students and staff say that this might not have happened without part of their week with alternative providers.
- The unit has improved the independent advice and guidance for students. The frequent sessions with the adviser work in tandem with students' experiences on alternative provision.
- Over the past three years, more students each year achieve GCSEs in English and mathematics. Last year, all Year 11 students on alternative provision achieved an English and mathematics qualification. Four of the 13 students gained a GCSE in English and 11 in mathematics. For most students, this represents at least expected progress from their starting points. Twelve of the 13 students went on to further education or employment. This year, the latest assessments show that most students are on target to achieve their expected grades for English and mathematics.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- analyse the information gained from monitoring the quality of alternative provision and students achievements and formally evaluate the impact on students' outcomes, with clear success criteria for their academic and personal development
- revise the child protection policy so that it gives good written guidance about the potential vulnerability of students who attend off-site alternative provision
- track students' personal development formally and thoroughly.

Yours sincerely

Heather Yaxley
Her Majesty's Inspector