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Jan Culley
Headteacher
Thurrock Pupil Referral Unit
The Culver Centre
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Dear Ms Culley

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Thurrock Pupil Referral Unit

Following my visit to your pupil referral unit on 24 January 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the unit since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the unit was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in November 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and the management committee are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The unit should take further action to:

- revise the action plan so that it accurately reflects the long-term aims of the unit, with suitably-linked measures for good performance
- determine clear criteria for future admissions to the unit
- improve students' attendance as a matter of urgency
- make sure that students have the good quality learning environment that they are entitled to.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, the deputy headteacher and the assistant headteacher, the assessment leader, a group of staff and two members of the management committee, to discuss the action taken since the previous inspection. I met two other members of the management committee at the formal

feedback at the end of my inspection. A telephone discussion took place with an adviser from the local authority. I visited both sites and saw students at work in each of the areas for primary and secondary students, and for students with medical needs. Information about each student's attendance and their access to full-time education was scrutinised, as well as details of exclusions.

Context

The two part-time interim headteachers who led the unit at the time of the full inspection have left and you are now the permanent headteacher. The interim assistant headteacher is now the deputy headteacher and a new assistant headteacher is in place. More teaching staff have been appointed on a permanent basis so that there is less reliance on supply staff. Some subjects are still taught by supply teachers, and include cover for staff on long-term sick leave.

Plans are well-advanced for the unit to become an academy, sponsored by Olive Trust. This will involve relocating the unit to a different site. Exact details for a new site and the date for the change to an academy are not yet finalised.

Main findings

In the short period since the full inspection many things have changed, as a result of extensive discussions between staff and the management committee about how the vision for the unit's future can be realised. You have been the significant driver of this and have successfully gained staff's confidence. They value the opportunities that you give them to contribute their ideas. The action plan, although suitable in the short-term, does not reflect the long-term vision that the staff and the management committee now have for the unit. There is a common understanding that the points for improvement noted at the full inspection must be addressed as a matter of urgency in order to turn around some poor practice, complacency and low aspirations for students in the past. All of the staff and members of the management committee that I spoke with are very positive about the future direction for the unit and want to be active partners in the significant changes that need to be made.

Changes that have already taken place are working well to set out higher aspirations for students. Tighter routines are in place at the start of the day and appropriate behaviour is rewarded more consistently. This means that the day starts purposefully and promptly, there is a smoother start to lessons and there are clear expectations of students to behave well. The senior team and the management committee are taking concerted action to make sure that each student has an appropriate full-time programme that interests them and that will support improved attendance. This includes reviewing the programmes for students with medical needs so that they can access a full timetable when they are well enough to do so. There is still more to be done to improve the range and quality of subjects on offer, but now the management committee frequently monitors each student's access to a full timetable. You have also set up weekly meetings to fine-tune the support needed when students do not attend or behave well. Students' behaviour has improved, as

shown in reduced fixed-term exclusions, but the changes have not yet improved their attendance.

The senior team and the management committee are now firmly committed to turning around low expectations from the past. They inherited a legacy of low aspirations amongst students, their families and local schools for students to return to mainstream schooling. Too many students who were permanently excluded from their primary or secondary schools have stayed too long at the unit. The senior team has made a good start in changing this by starting professional discussions with local schools about the unit's main purpose in providing short-term placements and clear programmes towards reintegration to mainstream schooling, especially at Key Stages 2 and 3, or to a full-time programme when they are medically fit to do so. The management committee actively seeks to gain the information they need from senior staff to challenge the unit's work, such as data on students' progress.

You are developing the roles of staff to spread responsibility and develop the skills needed to drive improvement. This includes extending the roles of learning mentors and the assessment leader. The assessment leader has done a good job in pulling assessments together and providing the senior team, the management committee and teachers with the information and systems that they need to know how well students achieve.

The learning environment is not as good as it should be. At the site for primary pupils, classrooms are bright, well-organised and generally well-resourced. But the accommodation, previously a children's home, is unsuitable to provide a full range of learning opportunities. At the main site, the building is poorly maintained, poorly resourced and does not provide the good quality learning environment or opportunities that secondary-aged students are entitled to.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

You have made it a priority to raise the unit's profile amongst headteacher colleagues and advisers within the local authority. This helps to make links between your staff and those in other schools, with a focus on curriculum development.

Local authority officers are working collaboratively with the management committee towards conversion to an academy, and anticipate working in partnership with the unit after it becomes an academy. In the intervening period, and as part of the local authority's support to schools requiring improvement to be good, a progress board will be set up to support and challenge leaders and the management committee.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Strategic Management Board, and the Director of Children's Services for Thurrock local authority.

Yours sincerely

Heather Yaxley
Her Majesty's Inspector