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3 February 2012

Mrs Julie Hills and Mrs Gillian Davies
Acting interim executive headteachers
Henry Allen Nursery School
Mitchell Walk
Amersham
Buckinghamshire
HP6 6NW

Dear Mrs Hills and Mrs Davies

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Henry Allen Nursery School

Following my visit to your school on 31 January–1 February 2012, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in September 2011. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Newly Qualified Teachers may not be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Interim Executive Board and the Director of Children's Services for Buckinghamshire.

Yours sincerely

Wendy Simmons

Additional Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place 19–20 September 2011

- Ensure that children are kept safe by meeting statutory requirements in all areas of safeguarding.
- Implement current plans to meet fully statutory requirements for staffing.
- Improve leadership and management by:
 - increasing the rigour of self-evaluation by leaders at all levels and developing a shared vision for improvement
 - ensuring that the performance of all staff is appraised each year improving communication in school so that adults feel valued and confident about contributing their ideas to development planning
 - regularly monitoring teaching and learning so that adults are helped to improve their teaching
 - analysing assessment data to check the progress of different groups of children and to identify where improvement is needed.
- Improve teaching by ensuring activities are consistently pitched at the right level and by giving children more opportunities to talk about their learning at the end of lessons.
- Strengthen the curriculum and increase children's physical activity by ensuring that outdoor learning is fully integrated into every area of learning and by facilitating more free flow between the classrooms and outdoor areas.
- Improve attendance rates by ensuring that absences are monitored more closely to identify trends and patterns.

Special measures: monitoring of Henry Allen Nursery Report from the first monitoring inspection 31 January –1 February 2012

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the interim executive acting headteachers, the Chair of the Interim Executive Board and a member of the local authority who is also on the interim executive board. The inspector spoke to children informally and observed their teaching and learning across a range of activities. A meeting was held with staff. A sample of children's progress and assessment procedures were evaluated. Safeguarding procedures were scrutinised.

Context

The substantive headteacher has not been in school since before the last inspection. Since September 2011, the school has been led by several acting interim headteachers. At the time of this visit, two acting interim executive headteachers shared the leadership. One of these was only in school for two days a week due to her commitments at another school. The current leadership is a short-term arrangement. A longer-term early years acting headteacher will join the school after 20 February 2012.

The governing body has been replaced by the interim executive board. This board is made up of knowledgeable practitioners as well as senior representatives from the local education authority. The local authority seconded a specialist early years teacher to work directly with the school. A 'Focus Group' has been established to support. A 'Parent Champion' was appointed and is working to ensure that parents and carers are kept informed about ongoing changes and developments.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The children are happy at school. Parents and carers are full of praise for the kindness shown to their children and they spoke about the improvement in allowing children to do things for themselves. The inspection agrees that this element is improving. There continues to be a lack of challenge for the most-able children.

Evidence about children's starting points, when they join the school, is not securely evaluated. As a result, there is not a firm enough base upon which to check and measure their progress. Staff agree that the use of assessment for this purpose is not yet firmly embedded but a start has been made. Sometimes, a combination of low expectations and insecure assessments is slowing progress.

The quality of teaching

A few days before the inspection, staff united to allow children greater flexibility to move more freely between all three classes, both for inside and outdoor activities, to promote 'free flow' and greater independence. Almost all parents and carers confirm that outdoor play is better. Inspectors found that children are doing far more physical activities. Teachers are beginning to be more focused on planning for the most-able children. However, children are still not talking about their learning enough. Often, this is because adults do not ask questions that help children to use longer sentences rather than one-word answers.

Although the curriculum is strengthening, teaching does not place sufficient emphasis on early writing and preliminary work on environmental sounds and letter sounds (phonics). Staff have not yet had suitable training for these areas. There are many missed opportunities to help children to identify numbers when counting. Good work has taken place to get rid of old books and to tidy the Nursery. But there is still too much clutter; this means that resources and space cannot be used to best effect for free-flow activities.

Judgement

- Improve teaching by ensuring activities are consistently pitched at the right level and by giving children more opportunities to talk about their learning at the end of lessons - inadequate progress.

- Strengthen the curriculum and increase children's physical activity by ensuring that outdoor learning is fully integrated into every area of learning and by facilitating more free flow between the classrooms and outdoor areas - satisfactory progress.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Children behave well. Such things as the new café-style snack time are enjoyed by children and this contributes to their improving personal and social development. There has been a review of procedures to improve attendance, and parents and carers are clear about the importance of this. The work of the 'Parent Champion' is aiding this in conjunction with tighter administrative systems. For example, immediate telephone calls are made to parents and carers when their children do not arrive. Leaders now ensure that the school does not close for parental consultation. These features have led to 10% increase in attendance, so that it is currently at 90%.

Judgement

- Improve attendance by ensuring that absences are monitored more closely to identify trends and patterns - good improvement.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Staff commented that as a result of changes they 'know more of the children now'. This is important in helping to provide equal opportunities for the children and to ensure that the setting is beginning to become a working community. Staff are beginning to feel valued. As one put it, 'There are far more staff meetings now, we can talk about things more.' Teamwork is beginning to strengthen.

Following training, staff have a much better understanding about safeguarding. There are high expectations from the interim executive board to ensure that child protection procedures are as rigorous as possible. Correct procedures are now fully in place for the safe recruitment of staff. Risk assessments, including audits of health and safety, are fully established. Daily checks are now being made on the learning environment. Food safety and personal hygiene facilities are adequate. However, the lavatories, although clean, often block; this is not good enough.

The interim executive board and acting headteachers have started to monitor the quality of teaching in a suitable way. Staff training is beginning to be focused on what needs to be done to bring about improvement. Work has begun to sort out staff contracts but formal performance management is not yet established. The school now correctly only takes the number of children that it should. The number of teaching staff has increased. The number of support staff is high. However, there is no caretaker. The school's budget is likely to be overspent in the next financial year. Thus, maintaining staffing at this level is a challenge that the interim executive board are correctly exploring. Parents and carers confirm the proactive work of the interim executive board and helpful support by the 'Parent Champion'.

Judgement

- Improve leadership and management - satisfactory progress.
- Ensure that children are kept safe by meeting statutory requirements in all areas of safeguarding - good progress.
- Implement current plans to meet fully statutory requirements for staffing level - satisfactory progress.

External support

The local authority, which includes representatives from the Early Years Development and Child Care Service, has given good support to the school. This has been carefully managed to ensure that the top priorities of safeguarding and day-to-day leadership are secure. The statement of action prepared by the local authority fully meets requirements. An experienced early years teacher is helping staff to understand the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage well. Added to this, they have successfully established a skilled interim executive board and are assisting with staff training.