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5 July 2012

Mrs A Bratton
Interim Acting Headteacher
Henry Allen Nursery School
Mitchell Walk
Amersham
Buckinghamshire
HP6 6NW

Dear Mrs Bratton

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Henry Allen Nursery School

Following my visit to your school on 3 and 4 July 2012, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in September 2011. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – good

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good

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 Governing Body 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 School

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 3–4 July 2012

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the interim senior staff in addition to the Chair of the Interim Executive Governing Body. Discussions were held with a representative from the local authority. The inspector spoke to children informally and observed teaching and learning. A meeting was held with staff. A sample of children's progress and assessment procedures were evaluated. Safeguarding procedures were scrutinised.

Context

The former temporary management team have been replaced by another interim headteacher and a former early years local authority advisory teacher. These key staff will leave the nursery at the end of the summer term. Plans are underway to temporarily relocate the school to buildings within the adjacent junior school as the Nursery site will be redeveloped to provide new accommodation. From September 2012, the headteacher of Woodside Junior School will become the acting executive interim headteacher, overseeing staffing, administrative matters and the building programme. Plans are currently underway to recruit a specialist early years leader on a fixed term contract of 1 year. Decisions regarding the long term leadership and management of the school will be made by September 2013 when the school moves back onto its permanent site.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The children are very happy at school. Parents and carers continue to be full of praise for the work of the staff. As one put it, 'Staff have maintained a great atmosphere for the children even with all of the pressures.' Parents and carers commented that there are always stimulating things for children to do. Inspection evidence shows that the range and quality of activities have improved well and this helps children to progress more effectively. For example, children enjoyed a strawberry-picking activity when visiting a local farm. Following this, discussions showed children's increased ability to express their ideas in longer sentences because staff are increasingly skilled at engaging children in conversations.

There are increasingly appropriate challenges for the most able children. This was exemplified when children were observed exploring how the sound of rain is intensified when they covered an umbrella with tin foil. Additional investigations included pouring water out of watering cans to compare the different sounds made on other metal objects. As a result, children confidently worked together and talked about what they were doing, using descriptive vocabulary confidently. Challenges

such as these are now recorded regularly as part of the improving assessment procedures. As a result, staff are beginning to have a clearer view about children's progress. There has been an increased focus on developing ways to check children's starting points when they join the school. Levels of attainment are rising securely.

The quality of teaching

There has been a concerted effort to develop the free movement of children between all three classes, including far more outdoor activities. As a consequence, children are helped to grow more quickly in their confidence and independence. This is aided by improved organisation of staffing and use of the 'key person' system, so that children understand routines and are supported in groups.

Children are doing more physical activities. For example, they had great fun erecting a running track with hurdles. Following this, adults interjected well, encouraging the children to improve their agility by running and jumping with increasing accuracy, confidence and speed. Moreover, adults made important links between different areas of learning, as observed when they were helping the children to write down and count up their personal scores. During this activity, the most able children added up and used number lines to find the correct numeral to go with their calculation.

Following helpful training about promoting discussions, adults are encouraging children to think and explain more precisely about what they are doing and/or learning. There is an increasing emphasis on promoting early writing and the use of letters and sounds (phonics). However, some staff are more skilled and accurate in correctly vocalising sounds than others.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement

- 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 – good
- 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 – good

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Parents and carers are very appreciative of the work that is being done to help their children to develop socially and emotionally. During the visit, there were many examples of children developing important skills, such as turn taking, negotiation, and cooperation. Children behaved well, showing respect for each other, and are helped to adopt safe practices.

The school continues to make immediate contact with families about absent children. However, there is an unacceptable culture of always authorising holidays in term time. As a result, too many children miss valuable learning time that has been financed by the authority.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement

- Improve attendance by ensuring that absences are monitored more closely to identify trends and patterns – inadequate

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Leaders are raising expectations effectively. Teamwork has been developing very well. However, very recent notice of redundancies has lowered morale amongst staff. Staffing levels are now much higher than is usual. Good work has been undertaken to sort out staff contracts and to introduce performance management. Redundancies are a result of finer tuning concerning staffing levels, so that the school can maintain the correct balance of qualifications amongst staff while also working to reduce the very significant budget deficit. Very exciting plans are underway to rebuild the Nursery; this will be funded by the local authority.

Modelling of teaching by knowledgeable professionals was observed during the monitoring visit. Other staff are adopting new ideas because of the strong guidance, support and encouragement. As a result, the provision of equal opportunities is improving, as children's individual needs and capabilities are beginning to be better reflected in activities. Whole-school self-evaluation is improving steadily through regular monitoring of teaching. The Interim Executive Board has taken firm action to monitor and improve the quality of teaching. Improvements in assessment systems help staff to plan increasingly suitable activities that challenge children. Examples of good photographic records capture the curriculum improvements but do not record enough about actual skills and children's use of language.

Child protection procedures and safer recruitment of staff are now well established in the working life of the school. Risk assessments are detailed and effective and the daily safety of children is always taken very seriously.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement

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

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 remain high profile and that teaching and staffing issues are being improved quickly.