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18 November 2013

Mrs Jenny Kennedy  
Headteacher  
Ditton Nursery School  
Dundalk Road  
Widnes  
Cheshire  
WA8 8DF

Dear Mrs Kennedy

### **Special measures monitoring inspection of Ditton Nursery School**

Following my visit to your school on 14 and 15 November 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in April 2013. 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.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:  
The school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published 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 Strategic Director of Children and Enterprise for Halton.

Yours sincerely

Allan Torr  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

## Annex

### The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in April 2013

- Improve the quality of teaching and children's achievement by working with all staff to make sure they:
  - ask questions that can be answered in different ways and ensure that these encourage children to participate in an activity
  - encourage children to think by talking to them about what they understand, know, are finding out or trying to do
  - physically get down to children's eye level in order to better involve them in play and investigation
  - review how the daily routine can best promote good learning
  - include opportunities for staff to meet daily with their allocated children for a short group time
  - understand the characteristics of effective learning as described in the Early Years Foundation Stage framework
  - observe teaching and learning in an outstanding nursery school.
- Improve the leadership and management of the school by:
  - ensuring that leaders listen to, consult and involve staff more in the development of the school
  - gathering feedback from staff about the work of the school and making sure staff understand decisions that are made
  - improving formal observations of the work of teachers and nursery nurses by giving them clear, precise and challenging feedback about how to improve their teaching and children's learning and then checking that improvements are made
  - setting goals for teachers and nursery nurses that are clearly linked to learning and teaching and are specific, measurable and achievable
  - ensuring that sufficient time during staff training and leadership meetings is spent discussing how to improve teaching and learning and deepening understanding of the Early Years Foundation Stage framework
  - establishing links with outstanding nursery schools to support leaders in improving the work of Ditton Nursery School
  - ensuring that children in both classrooms benefit from being taught for equal amounts of time by a qualified teacher
  - ensuring that leaders and the governing body understand what progress to expect of three- and four-year-olds
  - evaluate the progress made by different groups of children during their time at the school.
- Improve the governing body's knowledge of the nursery's work, its strengths and weaknesses so that they hold leaders closely to account for their performance.
- Improve children's behaviour by ensuring that all staff:
  - supervise children well when they move around the school and ensure that children do not run around indoors
  - are given clear guidance about how to support children to behave well.

## **Report on the second monitoring inspection on 14 to 15 November 2013.**

### **Evidence**

I met with three representatives of the governing body and two representatives from the local authority. I met with senior leaders and conducted two joint observations with the headteacher. I observed each of the teachers and teaching assistants teaching. For this visit I concentrated on gathering evidence about teaching, and leadership and management rather than about behaviour.

### **Context**

The new headteacher started in September. Since my previous visit a new parent governor has been appointed. A teaching assistant is absent with a long-term illness.

### **Achievement of pupils at the school**

Children's achievement is improving slowly. Adults measured children's skills and development in the first few weeks after starting in the Nursery against the descriptions of what should be expected for three- and four-year-old children. As yet, these assessments are not complete because senior leaders noticed variation between the judgements made by different adults. As a result, any measures of children's progress would be inaccurate until the initial assessments are accurate and agreed.

There is too much variation in the progress that children make. Some children make better gains in their skills and knowledge. A group, for example, chose to experiment with sounds by experimenting with different beaters on drums and other resources. The adult working nearby challenged them to think about and investigate how to increase and decrease volume and to think about the effect on sound as it travelled down a long tube. As a result, children had an increased understanding of how sound travels and how to control sound. Conversely, other children make very little progress; most noticeably, the children who spent a large majority of their time during the inspection on wheeled toys. They were already confident and adept at accelerating, steering, balancing and solving problems, for example, how to reverse up a hill or how to tow another bicycle. There was little challenge and, although they thoroughly enjoyed themselves, they did not learn or develop much. As a priority, adults should consider how to track children to ensure they are meeting children's individual needs and that every child makes good progress.

The environment inside and outside has improved significantly since my last visit in July. As a result, children are challenged more and have started to make better progress. In the corner of the outdoor area there is a dog kennel and dog bowl with a few 'log dogs' on leads. These have led to some good opportunities to develop children's imaginative play. Some girls, for example, took the logs for a walk on their

leads around the outdoor area explaining to them what each area was for. They then posed and solved a problem of their own making by speeding up the tour by carrying them on the back of a bike and made sure the leads were safely tucked away in the basket at the back of the cycle. This is an example of how the environment has had a positive impact on children's learning and achievement.

In contrast, although the indoor and home area have improved significantly, children's progress is still hampered because of a lack of challenge or focus to the learning. For example, a group of girls decided to play in this area and enjoyed themselves sitting around and using the resources. There was little language or communication development and no intervention or challenge from an adult. As a result, the group achieved little.

### **The quality of teaching**

There have been improvements on the recommendations made in the inspection report. Teachers now physically lower themselves so they can speak eye to eye with children. The headteacher has bought adult-sized, low-level chairs so they can sit comfortably with children in groups. There has also been an improvement in how most of the adults ask questions to encourage children to join in and learn in activities. A teacher with a group of children rolling toy vehicles down slopes asked questions such as 'what could we use to..., why do you think it went further and why is this side better...?'. As a result, instead of one-word answers, children gave sentences or answers in phrases and were challenged to think and explore their scientific understanding.

Adults now meet the children in their key groups every day which is an improvement from the inspection. There is a missed opportunity to give each child a daily challenge, to follow up on yesterday's learning or to plan tasks to meet each child's individual needs. Adults still need to see the potential of this time to extend children's knowledge, vocabulary and their learning by observing how the best teachers use this time. The teaching of early reading and phonics (letters and the sounds they represent) is not yet good enough and needs urgent and significant improvement. This should be a priority for the school. Adults have received their first training and have introduced a daily phonics session which is an improvement since my last visit in July. They now need to observe and copy the best practice in teaching these important reading skills so that children make better progress and are prepared for moving onto Reception.

A key aspect of teaching three- and four-year-olds is to plan sessions that meet each child's individual needs. This needs to be a priority for the Nursery before my next visit. Adults assess what children can do and what they have learned but there are very few written 'next steps' to enable adults to take children onto the next stage of their development. The learning journeys which record assessments of each child vary widely in quality. Some are well written but others are full of adults' spelling

mistakes and grammatical errors. Important areas, such as comments from parents and carers and next steps in development, are left blank. This is because the quality assurance of these books remains inadequate. Some children were able to spend the majority of two days riding on bicycles without much adult interaction and their individual learning needs were missed. The Nursery staff need to spend some time on thinking of the best way of tracking pupils around the unit and what each child has learnt.

Adults have started to plan sessions and activities that are based on children's interests, which is a good improvement since the inspection last April. They also take advantage of special events. On the second day of the inspection, for example, boys and girls dressed as superheroes for *Children in need*. They were thrilled when 'Spiderman' came to visit the Nursery and they spent time exploring the outdoors to look for superheroes.

### **Behaviour and safety of pupils**

I did not spend much time on gathering evidence about behaviour on this visit. However, children were friendly, cooperative and had productive relationships with adults and with each other. They were mostly well behaved. During the inspection there were two behavioural incidents which were not explored well enough by adults. Adults tackled inappropriate behaviour by telling children to show 'good sitting' but missed opportunities to be reflective and to tackle the cause of the weak behaviour.

### **The quality of leadership in and management of the school**

The new headteacher was able to work alongside the previous headteacher before she retired in the summer. This has meant she has hit the ground running. The pace of change and improvement has quickened and is most noticeable in the Nursery environment. Changes to the fencing and to the front door have improved security and children's safeguarding. Changes to resources, such as an inviting home corner, an exciting mud kitchen and a large den, have all contributed to children having more chances to explore and learn through finding out and through imaginative play.

The headteacher has an accurate view of teaching and has introduced a new performance management system which involves observing and checking the work of all adults and giving much clearer and precise targets to help them improve their teaching. It would be even better if the points for improvement from the Ofsted report were included within the monitoring so that members of the governing body could better identify the progress the Nursery is making. Senior leaders have started gathering the views of adults to evaluate how well the Nursery is doing. The headteacher has also started giving staff more areas of responsibility, which is

beginning to improve the Nursery's capacity to improve and a sense of contributing to the school, consequently, morale is improving.

The headteacher has ensured the school is outward-looking. Staff have visited two schools graded as outstanding by Ofsted and have taken some of the ideas and used them to improve their practice in Ditton. They have also been trained to know more about the legal regulations for teaching three- and four-year-old children and to understand what is expected of teaching in the Nursery. To move forward there is need for staff to shadow, team teach and to learn from expert teachers who can model what good teaching is like and a shift of focus from changing the classrooms and the outdoors to improving the quality of teaching.

The governing body has been strengthened by the appointment of two experienced and knowledgeable members of the local authority who have been modelling the sort of questions governors should ask. They have also been showing how governors should challenge the school to improve. The governing body has approached a national leader in governance with a view to conducting a full external review in the near future. A new parent governor has taken up her position. There is now a need to involve parents and carers much more in the life of the Nursery by incorporating their views into improvement planning and the education of their children. In learning journals, for example, despite there being a space for parent comments and views and space to identify each child's next steps these were left blank. There are a few small signs of improvement, for example, increased parent attendance at a Saturday gardening event and volunteers to accompany children on a trip. The website which is a statutory regulation is now ready to be launched.

### **External support**

The local authority has provided effective support. In addition to supporting the governing body, it has provided training. As a result, staff are much more knowledgeable about what is expected of provision in a Nursery school and have a basic understanding of how to teach phonics. The local authority appointed a nationally renowned expert in Early Years education to be the School Improvement Partner. Together with other local authority experts, the support has helped to improve lesson planning, the structure of the day and child-initiated activities. The local authority helped to organise an external audit of the outdoor area and the classrooms to make them more appropriate for children of this age. It has arranged for extra time from a teacher so that the assistant headteacher could lead on assessment and tracking of children's progress. The authority's personnel department has supported leaders to tackle a long-term absence and the premises department has enabled the school to change a climbing frame into a den. The authority has also brokered support from other nursery schools locally and in the North West. As a result, the headteacher is able to share and bring expertise back into the school.