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4 July 2014

Miss Anne Gunning
Headteacher
Millfield Nursery School
Bell Street
Sunderland
Tyne and Wear
SR4 6JR

Dear Miss Gunning

Special measures monitoring inspection of Millfield Nursery School

Following my visit to your school on 2 and 3 July 2014, 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 December 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 Executive Director of People's Services for Sunderland.

Yours sincerely

Christine Inkster
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in December 2013.

- As a matter of urgency, take steps to reduce the number of accidents by ensuring that incidents are recorded accurately and action is taken to avoid reoccurrence.
- Improve the quality of teaching and children's achievement so that they are at least good by:
 - ensuring that children's development is assessed and recorded accurately to identify next steps of learning that build upon children's knowledge and skills
 - planning activities to meet the needs of the different groups of children
 - putting into place procedures for identifying children's special educational needs and establishing the correct programmes of support
 - providing opportunities for staff to observe teaching and learning in an outstanding nursery school and reflect on their own teaching through coaching and mentoring.
- Improve children's attendance by:
 - analysing attendance rates, especially among children who attend afternoon sessions
 - working more closely with parents to establish better attendance routines.
- Improve the effectiveness of the leadership and management by:
 - ensuring that leaders listen to, consult and involve staff more in the development of the school through gathering feedback from staff about the work of the school and making sure staff understand decisions that are made
 - ensuring teaching and learning are monitored more rigorously and that feedback to staff about how to improve their teaching and children's learning is clear
 - ensuring that sufficient time during staff training and leadership meetings is spent discussing how to improve teaching and learning and evaluating the impact of training provided on teaching and learning
 - establishing links with outstanding nursery schools to support leaders in improving the work of Millfield Community Nursery School
 - ensuring that leaders and the governing body understand what progress to expect of three- and four-year-olds and that they evaluate the progress made by different groups of children during their time at the school
 - improving the governing body's knowledge of the Nursery's work, its strengths and weaknesses so they can hold leaders to account for their performance
 - undertaking an external review of governance in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 2 - 3 July 2014

Evidence

The inspector met with and observed the quality of teaching and learning in the Nursery jointly with the supporting headteacher and the Early Years Foundation Stage support and intervention officer from the local authority. The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the special educational needs coordinator, a senior representative of the local authority, the Chair of the Governing Body and two other governors. The inspector also held a brief discussion with most members of staff on an individual basis and with a small group of parents waiting to collect their children.

Context

The substantive headteacher and the Early Years Foundation Stage lead teacher are currently absent from school. The headteacher of Oxclose Nursery School and the Early Years Foundation Stage support and intervention officer from the local authority are jointly providing leadership for the school. An experienced supply teacher has been appointed to cover the absence of the lead teacher. One nursery nurse has retired and a nursery nurse and a teaching assistant have been appointed. The special educational needs coordinator is limited to office duties at present and the special educational needs nursery nurse is absent. There is a supply nursery nurse covering this post. Two new governors have been appointed to the governing body and there remains one parent governor vacancy.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The analysis of the school's data shows that the rates of progress made by most groups of children are improving in most of the areas of development. This is because children now have access to more interesting and stimulating activities which capture their imagination and the quality of teaching is improving. A new tracking system has been introduced and data is analysed to identify any children who may be underachieving. This information is beginning to be used more effectively to plan activities to address any concerns. For example, an analysis of data at the end of the spring term indicated that progress in mathematics was slower than in other areas of learning. Staff have taken steps to address this by incorporating more incidental opportunities within other activities to encourage children to develop their counting and number skills and their skills in shape, space and measures. For example, in a cheerleading physical activity with 'pom-poms' children were encouraged to count to 10 and use language, such as over, under, in front, behind, up and down. Children making magic potions with flower petals were encouraged to count the petals as they put them in their bowls and the teacher

ensured that their counting was accurate. However, there are not always specific sessions for children to be taught early mathematical skills in a systematic way.

Disabled children and those with special educational needs are beginning to make better progress, particularly in their self-confidence and self-awareness, listening and attention, understanding and speaking. This is because of specific input by adults to help develop children's language and communication skills. The special educational needs coordinator is analysing data and identifying more precisely what these children need to do to improve. Each child now has a personal learning plan and is being supported more effectively to meet their targets. Boys and girls are making similar progress. Children from minority ethnic backgrounds and those who speak English as an additional language are making better progress because staff have received training on how to meet their needs more precisely. However, in small group sessions, there are still not always sufficient visual prompts to help children understand what they are expected to learn, particularly for those children who speak English as an additional language.

Progress for the oldest children is slower in reading than in other areas of development, so staff have reorganised the library to make books more accessible to children and are spending more time reading with them, particularly with books in which they have shown an interest. However, phonics (letters and the sounds they represent) are not taught in a systematic way. For another group of children, their personal, social and emotional development is weaker, so staff have begun to address this by developing personal support plans to help improve the children's behaviour and their relationships with others. These children are now learning to take turns and share equipment with others more readily. Children are not making as much progress in writing as they should because there are not enough opportunities for children to develop their skills and staff do not always ensure that children are developing a secure and correct pencil grip.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching is improving because current leaders have ensured a clearer structure to the daily sessions and staff are able to work with the children in their group more regularly. This is helping to improve the quality and accuracy of assessments of children's learning. Current leaders are working closely with staff to ensure that assessments and data are being used more effectively to plan appropriate 'next steps' in children's learning. However, there is still more work to be done to ensure continuity and progression in children's learning. Staff have indicated that this support is helping them to meet children's needs more effectively. Staff are following up on children's interests more readily, for example, children were fascinated by observing snails and spiders and were keen to make models of these creatures with clay and twigs. Children were excited about making magic potions and the teacher provided opportunities for the children to write down their recipes, enabling them to begin to develop their early writing skills.

While outdoors, one small group of children were encouraged to solve a problem for themselves and were expected to explain the reasons for their actions. They were using large construction apparatus to build a ramp for a car. The adult asked probing questions to encourage children to think for themselves how the ramp could be built to ensure that it was the right size for the car and so that the car would balance on the top of the ramp. However, overall there are still not enough opportunities for children to solve problems for themselves. The quality of questioning, although beginning to improve, is not always as effective as it should be to promote children's thinking and staff do not always give children enough thinking time to enable them to respond to questions more fully. While there are more incidental opportunities for children to develop their skills in reading, including phonics, writing and mathematics, these are not always planned precisely enough to ensure continuity and progression in children's learning in these areas.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Children's behaviour is improving because they are more engaged in learning and activities are more interesting and stimulating. As a result of the new structure to the sessions, there are fewer opportunities for children to run around the setting or wander around. There are now clear daily routines which the children are beginning to understand and staff are feeling more confident with this structure. There is a calmer, more purposeful atmosphere and children are happier and more settled. Current leaders have plans in place to review the behaviour policy and procedures in the very near future. Records of accidents and incidents are now kept rigorously and the business manager completes a monthly analysis of these identifying when and where they take place. Leaders have taken steps to address issues identified through the analysis to help prevent any further incidents. For example, a gate and fence have been installed across the cloakroom area and the number of incidents in the area has been reduced, with none recorded last month. Although most parents spoken with and who responded to the school's own questionnaire expressed positive views about the work of the school, a very small number of parents expressed concerns about particular incidents which had occurred with their child several weeks ago. Accident records showed that these had been recorded appropriately and parents had been invited in to discuss the concerns, but had not taken up this opportunity. The current leaders are keen that if parents and carers have concerns, they should come into school to discuss these with them.

Observations showed that children are working more cooperatively together, learning to take turns and share equipment. This was shown when two children tried to sit in a car at the same time. They resolved the problem themselves, with one child agreeing to fill the car with petrol while the other child drove the car and the activity successfully continued for quite a period of time. Children are now able to concentrate for extended periods of time because they are enjoying their learning more.

Children's attendance remains a concern. Although the business manager is vigilant in analysing attendance and leaders are monitoring this carefully, attendance is not as good as it should be. There are plans in place to introduce 'Spike' the attendance mascot to encourage children to want to come to school. However, there have been outbreaks of illness, such as chicken pox, and there were a number of children who were absent or taken ill during the inspection visit due to a sickness virus. Because of more flexible options available, a few children arrive at a later stage for the morning session, which means they miss important key worker time or focused teaching sessions which limit the progress they make.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The current leaders have made notable improvements in recent weeks. They have a very clear understanding of the quality of teaching and what needs to be done to improve, as shown through discussion on joint observations. They have promptly started to address staff concerns and ensured that there are clear structures and procedures in place. Staff say they feel they are now much clearer about their roles and have more time and opportunities to spend with children in their groups. Leaders are working hard to improve the use of assessment to improve planning to ensure that adults have a better understanding of what children need to learn next. The special educational needs coordinator has a more secure knowledge and understanding of the needs of children with special educational needs and is measuring the impact of the actions taken on the progress of individual children. Staff are benefiting from visits to other Nursery settings, including Pennywell Nursery School, where they are observing good practice. This is helping to improve the quality of teaching and assessment because staff from both schools are checking assessments together.

Governance is improving. Although, due to a misunderstanding, the external review of governance has not yet taken place, governors have accessed resources and have conducted an audit of governors' skills. They have established link governor roles and governors are making regular visits to the Nursery to see for themselves how well children are learning. They are reporting their findings to the full governing body and keeping appropriate records. They have appointed new governors, one of whom has an education background, and there is now a higher level of challenge to school leaders, as shown in the minutes of the governing body meetings. One parent governor is keen to improve communication with parents and is taking steps to seek the views of parents to help address any concerns they may have.

External support

The local authority support has been effective, particularly in recent weeks. The senior school improvement officer has provided support from the Early Years Foundation Stage support and intervention officer and brokered support from the

headteacher of Oxclose Nursery School to secure the leadership of the school in the absence of substantive leaders. This has been effective and notable improvements are already evident. The Early Years Foundation Stage support and intervention officer worked with the substantive headteacher, prior to her absence, to improve the school improvement plan and made appropriate recommendations. The local authority has also provided support from the special educational needs school improvement adviser and from an Early Years Foundation Stage support teacher to help make improvements. The impact of this is evident in the improved provision, particularly for children with special educational needs.