

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mrs Louise Foster
Stonehill Nursery School
Stonehill Road
Derby
Derbyshire
DE23 6TJ

Dear Mrs Foster

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Stonehill Nursery School

Following my visit to your school on 19 October 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection 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 school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in February 2017. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- establish partnerships with at least one early years setting so that a clear annual cycle of external moderation of children's achievements can begin.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with yourself, the deputy headteacher, the senior leader, and the leader of the early years at Dale Community Primary, the school with which Stonehill Nursery is federated. I also met members of the governing body to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection and spoke with a group of parents. I met with staff at the end of the school day. I evaluated the leaders' improvement planning and undertook a scrutiny of the learning journals of

children of different ages. I also met and toured the school with you to see lessons taking place in all year groups. I checked that the school's records of safeguarding checks met requirements.

Context

Following the February 2017 inspection, the leader of the early years at Dale Community Primary School, the school with which Stonehill Nursery is federated, was temporarily seconded to the nursery. A permanent senior leader was appointed at Stonehill from September.

Main findings

You and senior leaders are unquestionably taking effective action to become a good school as rapidly as possible. Immediately following the inspection, you wasted no time in ensuring that the early years leader from Dale Community Primary School was moved to Stonehill to act as senior leader on an interim basis. This teacher has now been able to return to her role there because a new senior leader has taken up this post from the start of the current term. Although she is relatively new to your school, she has created a positive and visible presence, and has helped to raise expectations for all staff as to what children can achieve. As headteacher, you have continued to communicate a clear vision and to ensure that rapid improvements are being secured. All staff are clear as to the part they need to play to bring about improvements and are rising to the challenge. Morale is positive and improving because staff can see the positive impact of their new ways of working. Staff with whom I met during my visit told me that they feel part of a collaborative team. They explained how there is now a clear and high mutual expectation that every child will make at least good progress from their starting point.

You have arranged for staff to visit good and outstanding nursery settings within Derby to see effective teaching for themselves. This has helped them to learn how provision in these settings is organised and how teachers there plan effectively to meet children's needs. Staff have returned from these settings energised to use many of these ideas themselves. You and staff are reorganising and enhancing the learning environment. For example, you have enlarged the outdoor area for two-year-olds to promote children's physical development. You are making sure that resources are readily available for children to choose and use independently. You are also ensuring that spaces, such as the construction area, have opportunities for children to draw and write on clipboards, and have effective displays asking questions such as 'What can you build today?' During my visit, I saw children engaged well in the activities staff had planned for them by, for example, making diva lamps out of clay, while others were busy mark-making outside using coloured chalks. Inside, a group of children were purposefully engaged together in role play to tell the story of Goldilocks. Further visits by staff to effective settings are taking place shortly.

You briskly put into place interim arrangements for monitoring the quality of teaching during the summer term. From this September, you have sensibly aligned Stonehill's system of monitoring with the one used at Dale Community Primary School. The senior leader now carries out weekly visits to classrooms and observes smaller group sessions when, for instance, staff teach children early phonic skills. In addition, she looks at the records of learning staff make in children's learning journals. The senior teacher then informs you of her findings. You are then able to let governors know about where actions have proved effective, together with what more is needed and why.

You and staff have revised the format that they use to plan learning. It now includes clear core expectations of learning, along with the vocabulary staff must use frequently with children that week. Planning also takes much stronger account of children's interests. For example, the day prior to my visit, a child had found a stone and had told staff that it was an egg. Knowing that the children liked dinosaurs, staff adjusted their planning so that the following day they made footprints in the mud area and built a nest with a large toy egg in. Children were highly excited to hold the egg, and keen to talk imaginatively about how the little dinosaur 'might eat us when it hatches!' Staff are also planning more effectively in respect of the group sessions that children have. Teachers set out, for instance, the specific phonic sounds that they will teach children each week. As children are having more frequent opportunities to both learn and apply their phonic knowledge, children's rates of progress in their reading are beginning to increase.

You have established a twice-weekly system to review all planning. You ensure that staff begin with what children can do already. You also make it clear that plans must not simply set out what activities children will do next, but what staff want children to learn from these. In order to emphasise this, a 'next steps wall' is prominently on display. Staff adjust this daily to reflect the learning they expect specific children to make, such as 'I can hold my pencil comfortably when I write my name.' This also helps parents to see the link between the activities that teachers are organising and the skills their children are developing as a result. Parents I met during my visit told me they find this display useful in thinking what they can do at home to help their child.

You are aware that, in order to improve children's communication skills, and particularly their language skills, it is essential that staff are trained well so that they understand how to do this. You have arranged staff meetings to show staff how to model speaking to children, with an emphasis on describing, questioning and repeating key phrases and words so that children become more confident. During my visit, I saw many staff doing this well. For example, one adult asked a two-year-old child whether he preferred milk or water to drink. The child attempted to say that he wanted water. The member of staff offered it to him, saying, 'Water, please, you would like water', so that he would hear the word emphasised several times. Staff have also begun a new system to help children develop a love of reading by planning activities designed around books. This approach is proving successful

because children are very keen to discuss them together. Teachers choose books carefully, based not only on their ability to appeal to children's interests but also because they contain particular words and phrases that staff want children to learn. As a result, children's language skills are improving.

You have established a transparent system for managing the performance of all staff. You hold initial meetings with them and then ask staff to assess themselves against the targets they have. You then meet with them again to discuss these judgements. After summarising their performance, you plan with each member of staff the training they will need. The dialogue you are having with staff is considerably increasing their accountability. It is indicative of the heightened expectation that all adults will ensure that they accelerate children's progress. Examples of anonymised performance management records show that you are unafraid to challenge staff if their view of their own skills is too generous. At the same time, staff like this new system because they feel that leaders are genuinely taking account of their thoughts and needs. Much of the training that staff are currently receiving is giving them skills in teaching children early phonic skills.

You are ensuring that the records staff make in children's learning journals take into account the expectations typically found in other children of the same age. You agree that the assessments of children's achievements staff have made in the past have often been imprecise. The senior leader is providing valuable ongoing training to teaching assistants as to how to assess children's skills accurately. Staff now discuss what their observations indicate about children's abilities with the senior teacher. The senior teacher is currently making final judgements, because you cannot be confident that teaching assistants are yet able to do this independently. However, you judge that within 12 months these members of staff will be able to assess with accuracy on their own. You are passing assessment information on to the governors, so that they can see for themselves the progress of, for example, boys compared to girls or of disadvantaged children. You have not, however, yet identified other schools with which to collaborate in order to moderate the judgements of staff.

External support

The local authority has helped the school to obtain additional support from an external adviser. This adviser has provided effective assistance to you in a number of areas, including establishing interim arrangements to monitor the quality of teaching and to give staff valuable ideas to enhance the learning environment. She has also reviewed with you the school's self-evaluation, to ensure that the judgements you make come from a wide range of evidence. In addition, your staff have attended training organised by the local authority to teach staff about early phonics teaching and learning.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Derby. This letter will be

published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Roary Pownall
Her Majesty's Inspector