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Mrs J McBride
The Teacher in Charge
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Dear Mrs McBride

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF MERIT MEDICAL PUPIL REFERRAL UNIT (PRU)

Introduction

Following my visit to your PRU on 6 and 7 March 2007, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in March 2006.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the unit's work, scrutinised documents and met with the teacher in charge (TiC), the special needs coordinator (SENCo) and representatives from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since the last inspection, the PRU has relocated from three sites across the city to one. The new site provides better facilities. The number of pupils attending Merit has risen by five to 29. Six pupils have been reintegrated into mainstream or special school provision. Teachers of mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT) have been appointed and an administrative assistant has been appointed to reduce the TiC's clerical work. However, there has been slippage in other planned appointments. The interim Director of Children and Young People's Services is expected to

confirm over the next couple of weeks that the unit can proceed with the appointment of a deputy TiC who will take up post from September. Eleven applications have been received for two part time teaching assistant posts to support work related learning, the reintegration of pupils and the SENCo.

Achievement and standards

The pupils' attainment in end of key stage tests, public examinations and certification in 2006 was reported on after the last monitoring visit. The PRU's current targets for those pupils in Years 11 and 9 indicate that attainment will have significantly improved in 2007. Three of the five pupils in Year 11 are expected to attain grade C or better in English and mathematics. Four out of five Year 10 pupils have been entered for GCSE modules in mathematics and science. All Key Stage 4 pupils are also pursuing appropriate courses leading to GCSE equivalent accreditation in ICT, citizenship, and personal social and health education (PSHE). Of the six pupils in Year 9, five are predicted to meet or exceed national expectations in science, three in English, and two in mathematics.

The PRU has established procedures to track progress on a termly basis and knows the percentage of pupils who are making at least one National Curriculum sub level progress in a term in English, mathematics and science. However, these procedures require refinement so that the PRU can quickly identify which pupils are not making expected progress and the strategies to support individual pupils or subjects. Monitoring of progress in foundation subjects has not yet been established. The personal development of pupils has been tracked since the start of this term. This is a helpful development given the emotional and psychological needs of many of the pupils who attend the PRU. However, it is too soon for the unit to be able to use the tracking system to measure the impact of its actions, for example to reduce the fear some pupils have of attending school.

As a result of the PRU now being based on a single site, the pupils are experiencing more consistent teacher expectations. Planning is regularly monitored and opportunities for teachers to plan together are available each week. Pupils respond well when they are actively engaged in tasks and expected to justify their answers or explain their strategies to solve problems. Since the last inspection pupils have more opportunities to demonstrate their learning. In several lessons observed, activities needed to be better structured to meet the needs of pupils, for example to record their calculations clearly or to stretch the investigation skills of the most able. Teachers have begun to place a greater emphasis upon expecting pupils to identify how they might improve the standard of their work and the skills or knowledge they need to demonstrate in order to attain National Curriculum levels or GCSE grades. All teachers have observed and worked with teachers in mainstream schools and this has helped to improve their teaching. For example, a history lesson on the causes of the First World War quickly held

pupils accountable for their prior learning. ICT now plays a more significant part in lessons and staff are keen to develop its use in order to engage pupils' interest. At times questioning lacks challenge and teachers explain what has been learnt rather than checking the pupils' understanding. The progress pupils make in lessons has improved since the last inspection but the quality of teaching remains uneven. The PRU is aware of this and knows that recent developments in learning and teaching and assessment policies need to be more consistently evident in the classroom. Monitoring of teaching has improved and is leading to clear training priorities for all staff and individual subjects. However, the PRU is aware that more robust procedures need to be in place as the observations from the LA reduce. Also, it recognises that it needs to sustain the monitoring of the impact of visits to good practitioners in mainstream schools on the quality of teaching at Merit.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2006:

- ensure that all pupils make sufficient progress in their lessons and courses and that this is fully monitored and evaluated – satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' personal development and well-being continue to be a strength of Merit. The pupils grow in confidence and enjoy their education. They are interested in their learning and work industriously. Pleasingly, pupils have settled readily to the new routines on the single site, socialise with one another and adults well, and eagerly take advantage of opportunities for physical activity or to do further work during lunch and break times. Plans to introduce table tennis and badminton facilities will further increase the pupils' opportunities to lead a healthy lifestyle. The introduction of a tutor time to begin the day enables adults to pick up any issues that are concerning pupils and, through negotiation, assess their personal development. The LA has conducted interviews with pupils which indicate that they feel safe at the unit. The view of some pupils that they do not receive enough homework has prompted useful discussions about teachers' expectations.

Quality of provision

The move to one site has significantly contributed to improvements in the curriculum and ensured equality of access to provision. Visits to a local museum, the theatre and the Lord Mayor's parlour have enriched pupils' experiences. Science lessons are now taught in an appropriate classroom and ICT is starting to be used as a learning resource throughout subjects. Entry level qualifications have been replaced by more appropriately challenging courses at Key Stage 4 which lead to GCSE or equivalent certification. However, it is too soon to judge pupils' attainment on these courses. Opportunities for pupils to take part in work experience or work related learning are steadily improving and pupils can now gain accreditation in this

aspect of their learning. Connexions provide valuable support in preparing pupils for the world of work or further education and training. Helpfully, the PRU has also enabled Year 11 pupils to make preliminary visits to local colleges. The PRU has plans in hand to increase the hours of teaching available to pupils from September in order to better meet the academic needs of pupils. However, the LA has not yet identified the funding for the additional staffing hours that will be required. Action is being taken to improve facilities so that pupils can study new courses such as food technology and life skills, and gain accreditation in art. Furthermore, the LA intends to have a curriculum policy in place for all its PRUs by the start of the summer term which will subsequently result in a policy outlining the expected provision for pupils who attend Merit.

The LA has established a more robust admissions policy and procedures have recently been introduced to track the stages from an individual pupil's admission to the unit through to their reintegration into school or college. However, it is recognised that the SENCo needs to be fully involved in the consultations with schools when a pupil with learning difficulties or disabilities is being admitted, whether they are being taught at the centre or require home tuition. The role of the SENCo has significantly improved. Alongside her responsibilities for teaching at the hospital, she now has time at the centre to assess pupils, establish effective individual education plans, and support teachers in using suitable strategies to improve pupils' progress. These developments are quite recent and the PRU plans to evaluate the impact of the new arrangements before Easter and make refinements.

The PRU is hosting its first Open Day shortly to share and celebrate its work. This is indicative of the improvements in communications between parents and the unit and Merit has plans in the near future to more regularly inform parents about homework and the progress of their children.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2006:

- improve the curriculum by increasing the breadth and quality of provision so that it meets the needs of all pupils – satisfactory.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management now place a greater emphasis upon monitoring and evaluation in order to measure the impact of the changes that have been made. The move to a single site, the establishment of new routines, and expectations at the centre and transferring pupils onto more challenging courses have been well managed. This has required considerable support from the LA and the focus is now on establishing the personnel and structures which will enable the PRU to maintain recent developments and continue to improve. As the support of consultants is steadily removed over the next term the LA and TiC are establishing appropriate procedures to

ensure accountability for standards at all levels. The new management board has now met twice and is incrementally playing a more significant role in monitoring the work of the PRU. For example, it has requested regular information on pupils' achievement and attainment and has received a presentation on ICT provision which resulted in additional resources being allocated by the LA. However, the board is being reconstituted for September 2007 in response to Department for Education and Skills' draft guidance and it is anticipated that some LA officials may cease to be members.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2006:

- ensure that the management committee holds the unit to account for its outcomes and acts as an advocate in seeking suitable provision for all pupils – satisfactory.

External support

The former headteacher, who is a consultant at the PRU, continues to provide valuable support and will be much missed when her role concludes next term. She has played a major role in securing better accommodation for the PRU and in strengthening monitoring procedures. The LA has made significant investments in terms of accommodation, resources and personnel which are improving the quality of education Merit provides. LA visits are well focused and leave staff with clear priorities for improvement. The secondment of an ICT adviser for half a term has had a beneficial impact on teachers' confidence in the use of ICT. The LA knows that its support in the near future must diminish in order that the PRU can demonstrate its own capacity to improve. At the same time it recognises that the lines of accountability between the LA and the TiC need to be formalised.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory.

Priorities for further improvement

- Closely monitor the progress of pupils and take swift action where there is evidence of underachievement.
- Ensure that recent developments in a range of policies (admissions, assessment, learning and teaching, and the curriculum) have a significant impact on classroom practice and the reintegration of pupils into mainstream schools or other appropriate providers.
- Strengthen the leadership and management of the PRU through the appointment of a deputy teacher in charge and the reconstitution of the

management board, in order to maintain recent developments as LA support diminishes.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of the management board, and the interim Director of Children and Young People's Services for Stoke-on-Trent.

Yours sincerely

David Simpson
H M Inspector