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Mrs J McBride
The Teacher in Charge
Merit Medical PRU
Penkhull Education Centre
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Dear Mrs McBride

Special Measures: Monitoring Inspection of Merit Medical PRU

Introduction

Following my visit to your PRU on 3 July 2007 with Usha Devi HMI, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the PRU 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 PRU's work, scrutinised documents and pupils' work, met with the teacher in charge (TiC), the deputy TiC and representatives from the local authority (LA).

Context

The number of pupils attending Merit has remained quite steady: seventeen are taught at the centre and five receive home tuition. A deputy TiC has been appointed and took up post two weeks ago. Two part time teaching assistants have been appointed to support the induction of pupils and their reintegration into mainstream or alternative educational provision. It is planned that their role will be extended in the future to help with work experience and work related learning. Improvements to information and communication technology (ICT) continue to be rapid, for example the computers in the hospital base are now part of the PRU's network and pupils receiving home tuition are able to access resources at home.

Achievement and standards

Provisional results for Key Stage 3 tests in mathematics and science indicate that not as many pupils will attain nationally expected levels as the PRU predicted. However, the PRU is considering requesting a remarking of some pupils' tests where they have missed their expected levels by only a few marks. All Year 11 pupils who attended the centre are expected to attain at least one GCSE which will be an improvement on the previous year. The range of qualifications available to those pupils in Year 11 next year will be extensively improved to include English literature, science, ICT, citizenship, religious education, and vocational subjects. The PRU recognises the importance of monitoring the progress of pupils and ensuring that swift action is undertaken to rescue underachievement. Useful procedures are being developed to support this, although these need some refinement and will require some time to become established as an effective tool to monitor pupils over time. In particular, the information currently available means that the progress of pupils is being measured from different starting points. However, it has already confirmed the PRU's concerns over the progress pupils are making in mathematics. Appropriate action is being taken to improve the teaching of this subject, for example support from the LA and the opportunity to observe practice in a nearby secondary school. Monitoring of progress in foundation subjects has yet to be implemented.

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

The PRU's monitoring shows that the pupils' personal development is good and a strength of the unit, although the fear of attending school amongst some pupils remains a barrier to their returning to mainstream education. The pupils have a good rapport with the adults who work with them and a calm, orderly atmosphere pervades the unit. The daily routines at the PRU are now well established. The introduction of table tennis is a good addition to the recreational opportunities available to pupils and plans are in hand to enable pupils to play badminton from the autumn onwards.

Quality of provision

Teaching has improved since the last visit. Teachers more frequently encourage pupils to demonstrate independence, choice and prediction in lessons. Pupils performed best when they were actively involved in their learning. There is evidence of teachers more often asking open ended questions, although, at times, adults are providing too much instruction and not sufficiently checking pupils' prior understanding, promoting their use of technical vocabulary, or developing the skills for independent study. The LA has an accurate picture of the strengths and areas for improvement, for example the need for pupils to have more opportunities to reflect

and consider their answers and for the level of work to be more challenging. Planning is better focused on individual needs, although the PRU recognises that it can be further improved by identifying the learning outcomes for individual pupils. The teachers have considered this carefully and have recently agreed improvements to their planning forms. These changes will be supported by training to help teachers to increase pupils' understanding of the current level of their work and the next steps they need to take to improve their attainment. Pupils' individual education plans set appropriate targets overall but lack specificity in explaining how these will be achieved through the development of skills or strategies.

Marking has improved overall. Although it is still too variable, there are now examples of good practice for the PRU to build on. Marking in English is consistently linked to learning objectives and gives pupils guidance on how to improve their work. However, the pupils' records of independent reading are not commented on. Marking in mathematics and science is more variable and in the case of mathematics does not provide sufficient guidance to help the pupils. ICT provides a good model of a process for checking pupils' progress, setting them targets and referencing assessment to National Curriculum levels. There are sound plans to introduce a common approach to homework in September, including a newsletter explaining its importance to parents. Importantly, planners are to be introduced in order to improve communication with home, providing, for example, a record of homework.

Plans are well underway to provide 20 hours of taught time from September. Pupils will experience an extended range of courses and qualifications, for example food technology, improved sports opportunities (including swimming), a qualification in the healthy body, short GCSE courses in citizenship and religious education and vocational studies. However, the PRU recognises it needs to develop more opportunities for work experience and work related learning. Pleasingly, one of the teachers has volunteered to lead this aspect of the PRU's work.

The coordinator for special educational needs (SENCo) is now playing a full role in assessing pupils' needs at the time of their admission. However, procedures for admissions and reintegration need to be tightened so that pupils and parents have a clear plan for the duration of their time at the PRU and the intended reintroduction into mainstream or alternative educational provision.

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

With the appointment of the deputy TiC the leadership and management capacity of the PRU has been strengthened. The TiC and deputy have begun to negotiate responsibilities and have clear roles for the line management of departments. However, the local authority's education officer for special needs acknowledges that

she must hold regular monitoring meetings to, in turn, hold the TiC and deputy TiC accountable and to ensure that the LA is meeting its responsibilities. The TiC's report to the management board is more detailed and records the pupils on roll, admissions, attendance, pupils' progress, and details of their reintegration. The TiC is in a position to report to the management board the average length of stay of pupils at the unit. The meetings of the management board are offering increasing challenge to the TiC, for example in considering admissions procedures and the systems to monitor pupils' progress. However, in response to draft national regulations, the PRU is in the process of reconstituting its management board so that it will act more effectively as an advocate and critical friend for the provision and support the raising of standards. Membership will include two headteachers, representatives from a university, a local football club's academy of excellence, and organisations concerned with pupils' welfare and future employability. The board will include parental representation and appropriately a number of LA advisers will be attending in a non voting capacity. Following a recent resignation, the board is currently without a chair.

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

Following the appointment of the deputy TiC, the former headteacher, who has been acting as a consultant, will cease to work with the PRU from the end of this term. She has provided valuable support and inducted the deputy TiC well. The LA's sustained work to improve ICT provision is having a beneficial impact on the quality of teaching and learning at the PRU. Opportunities to visit mainstream schools have improved the quality of teaching, although the PRU acknowledges that this has not yet had sufficient impact in mathematics. The LA has an accurate picture of the current quality of education provided at the PRU and the areas for development.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory.

Priorities for further improvement

- Implement the improvements to lesson planning so that teaching meets the needs of different pupils.
- Extend the curriculum to meet the needs and aspirations of pupils particularly with regard to work related learning and work experience.
- Ensure that admissions and reintegration policies provide a clear plan for pupils to make a managed move back into mainstream or special education.

- Ensure the reconstituted management board operates effectively as a critical friend and appoints a chair.
- Extend and refine the monitoring of pupils' progress.
- Improve the quality of provision in mathematics.

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

Yours sincerely

David Simpson
H M Inspector