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Mrs J McBride
Merit Medical PRU
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Dear Mrs McBride

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF MERIT MEDICAL PRU

Following my visit with Joan Hewitt, Additional Inspector, to your school on 14 and 15 November 2007, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the fourth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in March 2006. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good.

This letter and monitoring inspection report 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.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of the management board and the Director of Education for Stoke-on-Trent.

Yours sincerely

David Simpson
H M Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF MERIT MEDICAL PRU

Report from the fourth monitoring inspection: 14 and 15 November 2007

Evidence

Inspectors observed the PRU's work, scrutinised documents and pupils' work, met with the teacher in charge (TiC), the deputy TiC, the teacher responsible for work related learning and a group of pupils and representatives from the local authority (LA), and sampled the very good food that the pupils made as part of the new customer services course.

Context

The number of pupils receiving their education through the PRU has risen to 28. A teacher has taken responsibility for work related learning and a teaching assistant for food technology. Provision has been increased and pupils now receive 19 hours of taught time each week. Additional resources are actively being sought to extend this further.

Achievement and standards

Although not as many pupils as the PRU had predicted attained the nationally expected levels in Key Stage 3 tests in 2007, the majority did in English and science and this represents an improvement on 2006. All who completed their compulsory education attained at least one GCSE qualification and the majority attained a C grade in mathematics. Again, this represents an improvement in standards from 2006. The PRU has now established a clear and suitably challenging expectation of the progress students should make each year and is establishing more rigorous procedures to ensure that pupils are meeting these targets. Progress in mathematics has improved since the last visit. In English too few pupils are making enough progress and some appear to have regressed. Opportunities to develop literacy skills across the curriculum are underdeveloped.

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. A strong feature is the purposeful, calm ethos which is evident throughout the unit. Pupils are very helpful and supportive towards each other. They have strong and trusting relationships with adults and work in an atmosphere of mutual respect. They speak warmly of their experience at the PRU. One pupil commented, 'It's very welcoming, I feel safe and it has boosted my confidence.'

The understanding of how to live a healthy life is strong. Pupils engage in a variety of activities to support this. For example, the unit works with Stoke City Football Club

to provide skills and fitness sessions at the club's facilities. This boosts pupils' confidence and gives them valuable experience of working effectively away from the safe environment of the unit. The introduction of badminton during lunch and break times has increased their opportunities for physical recreation. The PRU has significantly increased the opportunities pupils have to make a contribution to improving the PRU. For example, they have contributed to plans to improve their outdoor facilities.

The unit has taken appropriate steps to improve the approach to reintegrating pupils to school and there have been some successes. The unit has demonstrated its commitment to reintegration through the individual plans drawn up for every pupil to return to school or transfer to post-16 provision. A minority of parents resist reintegration plans and the PRU works in partnership with other agencies to try to allay their fears.

Pupils are appreciative of changes to the curriculum and the improved quality of teaching and learning. They make the most of opportunities to gain qualifications and benefit from the increased hours. Several pupils strongly voiced the desire to receive a full five days of education.

Quality of provision

Teaching at the PRU is purposeful and pupils arrive at lessons expecting to work hard. A good feature is the way in which pupils demonstrate enthusiasm for their learning. The best lessons include opportunities for them to become actively engaged, but this is not consistent. Learning is less effective when pupils are insufficiently challenged and so do not make as much progress as could be expected of them. Whilst lesson planning has more detail than previously, it still lacks the detail necessary to ensure that all pupils are making the progress they should. Pupils' individual education plans are sound and now include strategies for teachers to use with pupils in supporting them to achieve their targets.

Pupils take a pride in their new planners, which provide a useful form of communication between the PRU and home. Homework is being set, although this is not yet systematic and the consequences when homework is incomplete have still to be fully developed.

Marking has improved overall. There are examples of good practice across subjects. Information and communication technology (ICT) provides the best example, giving clear references to National Curriculum levels and guidance on how pupils can improve their work. However, not all work is marked to this good standard.

Good work has been done by the deputy TiC with teaching assistants to identify how they can make the best contribution to the progress of pupils in lessons. This now needs to be shared with all teachers and lesson planning needs to reflect a more rigorous deployment of teaching assistants.

Significant progress has been made in increasing the quantity of taught time the pupils receive and the pupils are now pursuing qualifications that enable them to fulfil their potential. Provision now includes accredited courses in English literature, citizenship, religious education, food technology and performing arts. Additionally, pupils pursue engaging vocational qualifications such as customer services, the healthy body and the 'aspiring chef.' Although these developments are relatively new and their sustained impact on pupils' motivation and attainment yet to be proved, the pupils speak positively about the education they are now receiving, would like the hours they are taught to be increased, and value the opportunities they have to learn together. A useful audit has been undertaken of the provision the PRU offers for work related learning. The member of staff responsible for this area is well aware of the skills pupils need to develop and is improving opportunities for them to sample potential future career or educational opportunities. She is also actively engaged in establishing appropriate work experience for pupils in Years 10 and 11 and is aware of the need to refine procedures to evaluate the quality of these placements.

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 – good.

Leadership and management

Improvements in leadership and management have accelerated significantly. The TiC and the deputy TiC, who was appointed during the summer term, have clear job descriptions. They work effectively as a team and have complementary skills. They have helpfully instituted regular line management meetings with teachers and these are beginning to have an impact, for example with regard to the quality of teaching in mathematics. However, these do not yet include regular opportunities to analyse the progress pupils are making. Weekly meetings have been established with LA officials which have clear, distinct and relevant agendas. The PRU has helpfully used a recent Ofsted publication to evaluate the quality of its provision and identify priorities for improvement. Visits to other PRUs have helped to produce more rigorous procedures for the admission of pupils and a stronger commitment to reintegration. However, at present, some parents are resisting the opportunities that are being provided for their children to rejoin mainstream schools as quickly as possible.

The management board has been reconstituted and the new board has had one meeting so far. The membership combines a useful range of local headteachers, health authority and LA officials, and representatives of a nearby university and football club. These potentially will provide a strong critical and supportive friend, but the LA recognises that they will need training to carry out their responsibilities effectively. At present, the LA officer for special needs is temporarily chairing the management board. This is helpful whilst it establishes itself, although in the long run she recognises that this role will need to be carried out by someone else so that there is no conflict of interest, given that she is responsible for the PRU's budget and strategic development. Furthermore, the management board does not yet include parental representation.

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 local authority has made a sustained contribution to the improvement of mathematics. It has a clear awareness of what issues remain to be addressed with regard to classroom practice and acknowledges that a delayed training session on planning for learning should take place as a matter of urgency. The regular meetings between the LA and the PRU's senior leaders are strengthening its capacity to improve. Pre-admission documentation now recognises that Merit is an interim solution and planned reintegration into a mainstream school or appropriate post-16 provider is recorded from the outset. However, the LA recognises that it needs to be more robust in quickly identifying pupils who should be referred to the PRU. The PRU is benefiting from working closely with local schools, which is strengthening opportunities for its pupils to experience mainstream education and also making the PRU's specialist facilities available to others.

Priorities for further improvement

- Increase the number of pupils who are effectively reintegrated back into mainstream education.
- Securely embed procedures for monitoring the progress of pupils over time so that action can be quickly taken when there is evidence of underachievement.
- Ensure that teaching is better tailored to the needs of individual pupils.
- Make better use of the skills of teaching assistants in lessons.
- Refine the regular line management meetings to increase the focus on the progress pupils are making.
- Demonstrate that the significant changes to provision and leadership and management are sustainable and have a clear impact on the attainment of pupils.