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4 November 2008

Mr John Ayres
Executive Headteacher
RNIB Sunshine House, Northwood
33 Dene Road
Northwood
HA6 2DD

Dear Mr Ayres

Special measures: monitoring inspection of RNIB Sunshine House,
Northwood

Following my visit to your school on 21 and 22 October 2008, 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 December 2007. 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

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

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 and the Chair of Governors.

Yours sincerely

Judith Charlesworth
Additional Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of RNIB Sunshine House, Northwood

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 21 and 22 October 2008

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher, the head of education, the head of care, the chair and vice-chair of governors, representatives from the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), parents, and teaching, support and therapy staff.

Context

A number of changes have taken place since the last monitoring visit in April 2008. Several staff left at the end of the summer term, including two of the previous four class teachers. There are now three classes rather than four. There have been some changes in RNIB personnel, and further changes are due. The third round of recruitment for a substantive headteacher failed to find a suitable post-holder, and the interim headteacher chose not to continue in post after the end of the summer term. With the approval of all relevant authorities, the RNIB entered into an interim partnership arrangement with Grangewood School, maintained by Hillingdon Local Authority. The arrangement was to second the headteacher and provide a head of education for Sunshine House School from September 2008. The executive headteacher spends half his time at Sunshine House and the head of education is seconded full time. Grangewood had already provided support, guidance and training for Sunshine House since March 2008, through the National Leader of Education initiative from the National College for School Leadership. This liaison continues.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' achievement is improving. This is due to the successful action taken to improve the quality of education. The senior staff have introduced a suitable curriculum which underpins a new target-setting system for pupils. Consequently, classroom activities now have a real purpose and the impact of teaching on learning is much better. While standards, understandably, will always be very low, there is clear evidence in the staff's daily evaluations of pupils' learning and development that they are making progress towards the targets set for them this term. The system will soon yield sufficient information to determine pupils' achievement over a longer period of time.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' personal development has improved, and the strengths noted in the last monitoring visit have been maintained. These include, for example, relationships with staff, attendance and behaviour. The school is working to promote pupils'

healthy lifestyles by making sure that they have enough physical activity, eat healthily and use the outside facilities sufficiently. The importance placed on this aspect of pupils' personal development and well-being is shown by the school's recent engagement in gaining the Healthy Schools award, and in making physical education one of the first curriculum subjects to be put in place. Most significantly, however, is the change in pupils' attitudes to learning. The last visit noted that they often did not appear to enjoy what they were doing. This has changed. Pupils are now fully engaged in lessons, and are enjoying them. Pupils show they are listening by becoming silent in group activities, and respond very well to the staff's interactions, often by smiling broadly when relating to something particular being said or done. The senior managers have instigated several new activities to support pupils' personal development. These have been very well received by pupils, parents and staff. For example, pupils now eat all together in the dining room instead of in classrooms; the classes meet in the hall at the end of the day to sing a song and say goodbye; and assemblies, to which parents are invited, have concentrated on celebrating the different cultures and faiths represented in the school.

Quality of provision

The school has made good progress in improving the quality of provision since the last visit, when the curriculum, assessment and the quality of teaching and learning were all found to be inadequate.

A new curriculum, using Grangewood's as a model, was introduced in September 2008. This provides a clear structure for English, mathematics, science, personal, social and health education, and physical education. Its use is increasingly effective. The new, statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum is in place and builds upon the good work previously noted. Children aged five to seven also, appropriately, benefit from the EYFS curriculum. Uniform planning systems have been introduced across the whole school. They are working well and ensure that lessons are carefully planned to be curriculum-based, meet the needs of individuals and promote their progress. The remaining subjects are taught through a topic or cross-curricular activity. For example, all classes were working on the topic of Diwali, in preparation for an assembly at the end of the week. Lessons all included reference to a number of subjects. However, although improved since the last monitoring visit, planning for these topics is not yet good enough to ensure breadth and balance between subjects, or the systematic build-up of pupils' skills.

Assessment is much improved. Appropriate targets are now set for each pupil in the key curricular areas, using the national 'P levels' (which measure very small steps of attainment) as guidance. Therapy staff contribute to these targets, so, for example, speech therapy targets tie in with English subject targets. Individual education plan targets are identified in the pupils' curriculum planning so that altogether, there is good continuity in promoting their progress. The staff evaluate each pupil's progress towards their targets in every lesson. This provides good evidence of achievement and supports further planning for progress. Although improved, some targets and evaluations are not yet sharp enough to provide absolute clarity about whether a

pupil has achieved what was intended. Nevertheless, the new target setting and assessment system is very helpful and strongly underpins improvements in teaching, learning and achievement. Due to previous weaknesses in tracking attainment and progress, the school has not been able to accurately determine whether pupils are achieving enough. A system to assess individuals' attainment at specific times of the year and determine whether they are achieving enough is to be introduced in November 2008. This will provide detailed information to support planning and interventions for individuals. It complements the existing systems, but does not replace them.

An important result of these developments is improvement in the impact of teaching on learning. The staff have worked very hard to understand, develop and use the new systems and practices, and are very enthusiastic about them. All staff say that they feel that they now have a real direction for their work and are enjoying it. The curriculum provides a purposeful context for teaching and learning, and the planning and recording systems help staff work systematically to develop pupils' skills, knowledge and understanding. Activities generally meet individuals' needs well, and staff are more effective in helping pupils understand what is happening, or about to happen, than at the time of the last visit. However, there are occasions when more could be done to support pupils' understanding, for example, by the use of appropriate resources.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Set challenging targets for each pupil and monitor their progress regularly to ensure that all make the progress of which they are capable – good
- Develop and implement a suitable curriculum – good

Leadership and management

The staff, parents and governors are overwhelmingly positive about the improvements in the leadership and management of the school, and report a transformed establishment. The executive headteacher, head of education and Grangewood staff are continuing to provide very effective support and guidance to improve the school. Recent self-evaluation has resulted in an honest picture of the school's strengths and weaknesses. A clear, detailed plan of action has been set, against which the school's progress can be measured. Much has already been achieved. In addition, the senior managers are building up the capacity of the school staff to steer improvement and become competent leaders and managers themselves, and so be less reliant on external support. They are taking on this challenge enthusiastically, although it is early days yet. The new systems are robust and wide-ranging and include those underpinning the improvements in the quality of teaching, learning, assessment and the curriculum. Lines of communication have been strengthened throughout the school, and a collaborative, consultative ethos is being established. Regular meetings focused on pupils' achievement and well-being have been established between various groups of staff. Parents are more closely involved in planning for their children's progress, and in the everyday work of the school. Sunshine House is beginning to move forward more confidently. However,

the current partnership with Grangewood is for one year only, and work has not yet started on securing the long-term future of the school, either under the current partnership arrangement, or otherwise. The stability of the senior management structure is, therefore, not yet fully secured.

The governing body is strongly focused on supporting school improvement. It does this effectively by close monitoring of the post-inspection action plan, and honest, rigorous debate and constructive challenge. Members are much better informed about governance and the work of the Sunshine House as a result of training and regular visits to the school. The governing body understands its role as critical friend, and fulfils it effectively. Members have asked for clarity or more robust evidence of improvement on a number of issues, such as what 'success' looks like for each of the key issues identified. Governors have been instrumental in promoting some of the new practices in school, such as multi-professional planning meetings and greater parental involvement in target setting for their children. There is, however, insufficient clarity in relation to the lines of responsibility between the RNIB and the governing body for aspects of the strategy for improvement are not entirely clear.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Restore stability to the senior management structure to set a clear context within which the school can move forward with confidence – satisfactory
- Ensure that all governors are clear about their roles and responsibilities so that they can act as an effective critical friend to the school – good
- Implement rigorous and robust systems so that the effectiveness of the school's provision can be judged accurately and bring about improvements in teaching – good

External support

The RNIB submitted a statement of action after the first monitoring visit, which is later than usual. This was evaluated and found to require revisions as it was not specific enough about how all the necessary improvements would be ensured within the required timescale. A revised action plan has been written. Although better, it still does not clearly state what will be done to tackle each of the areas identified for improvement. At times, it concentrates too much on small operational actions rather than the bigger issues, for example, how to restore stability to the senior management team after the initial one year period of partnership with Grangewood has elapsed; or, how to judge improvement in terms of improved outcomes for the pupils.

Nevertheless, the RNIB is providing satisfactory support for the school. The organisation has established a strategic committee to oversee the implementation of its action plan, and good support is provided by the Manager of Children's Services. It has invested a very considerable amount of money in Sunshine House, and is keen for the school to improve, succeed and grow. The step to secure a partnership with Grangewood School is highly innovative and advantageous for Sunshine House.

However, at the moment, insufficient action is taking place on stabilising leadership and securing the long term future of the school.

The support provided by Grangewood School has been highly effective. This is not only in the provision of an executive headteacher and head of education for Sunshine House, but also the on-going professional liaison between the two staff bodies.