

Prospects Learning Services Ltd
Prospects House
19 Elmfield Road
Bromley, Kent
BR1 1LT

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk Direct T 020 8315 1250
www.ofsted.gov.uk Direct F 020 8315 1279



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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 29 January 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third 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 – good

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website.

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 third monitoring inspection on 29 January 2009

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work; scrutinised documents; and met with the executive headteacher, the head of education, the chair of governors, a representative from the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) and teaching staff.

Context

The interim agreement with Grangewood School to provide leadership and management for Sunshine House has been developed. The two schools, the RNIB and Hillingdon local authority are in the process of creating a more formal partnership, similar to a 'soft federation' between two local authority schools. This partnership is due to be formally agreed in February 2009. One class teacher has left Sunshine House, and the vacancy has been temporarily filled by a member of staff from Grangewood, pending the outcome of forthcoming recruitment.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' achievement continues to improve as a result of the improving quality of the curriculum and teaching. Staff are becoming more proficient in meeting the needs of pupils of differing abilities. This has a positive impact on learning and pupils' progress. As yet, there is no externally moderated data to confirm pupils' achievement and progress over time because the system has been in place for only one term. However, progress towards the curriculum targets set for each pupil, and towards the targets set in their individual education plans, is evident from the staff's daily evaluations. Lesson observations show that pupils of all abilities are engaged by and enjoy their work, and generally achieve well.

Personal development and well-being

The measures to support pupils' personal development and well-being that were noted at the last monitoring visit have been maintained and developed. Pupils continue to enjoy school, as shown by their alert responses in lessons. Apart from a small amount of challenging behaviour, pupils' behaviour and attitudes to work are mainly excellent. The school is developing its provision to help pupils lead safe and healthy lives and to develop the skills that will help them take their place in the community. The community ethos of Sunshine House is developing. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is effectively addressed through group and whole-school activities. These include assemblies to celebrate cultural festivals and various interesting curricular activities. For example, a visit from a horse and cart has been arranged to support the historical strand of the topic 'Travel and Journeys'.

Quality of provision

Since the last monitoring visit, good progress has been made on improving the quality of provision and addressing the identified weaknesses. Pupils are very well cared for and safeguarded. The senior staff have implemented a rigorous programme of monitoring and development which has raised the quality of teaching and learning. Most lessons are now good. In some instances, the pitch of lessons to address all pupils' needs, the resources used, the input from support staff and the teacher's skills are outstanding. Occasionally, however, work still does not fully address the needs of each pupil in the group. For example, the content of a lesson can be too abstract for lower-attaining pupils, with insufficient resources to support their understanding. This has already been identified by the senior managers. Challenging targets for further improvement in the quality of teaching have been set, and the senior staff are implementing a robust professional development programme to support further improvement.

Assessment continues to improve well. Curricular targets for each pupil are set in more subjects than at the time of the last monitoring visit, to accompany the new topic planning. Curricular targets correlate well with targets in pupils' individual education plans, to which therapy staff continue to have a valuable input. The quality of the targets is improving, and it is now easier for staff to determine whether a pupil has achieved what was intended. Progress towards all targets is recorded assiduously after every lesson which provides a wealth of information on pupils' developing skills. This is generally used effectively to inform planning for progress. However, the improvement of target setting and the use of this information to underpin planning have been identified as an appropriate focus for this term's professional development programme.

A commercial system for assessing pupils' attainment and progress has been piloted, and difficulties in its administration, due to pupils' visual difficulties, are being ironed out. Full assessments in English, mathematics and science will be carried out in April, and the results sent to Durham University for external moderation and comparison with national data. This will form an accurate baseline measure of pupils' attainment, from which their achievement will be determined in due course. Although it is a long-term process, the system is extremely robust.

The new curriculum is developing well and is being used effectively to underpin teaching and learning. The core subjects of English, mathematics, science, and personal, social and health education are running well, and the schemes of work are building up as new material is added. Suitable topic planning has been introduced this term. A two-year programme of topics has now been developed. A good balance of curriculum subjects is maintained over the course of the programme, and all strands in each subject are properly addressed. While all classes follow the same topic, the content for each class varies according to pupils' needs and interests. The first detailed topic plan, 'Travel and Journeys', has been produced for this term. It provides interesting and engaging opportunities to support pupils' learning and development.

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 school has made considerable progress towards the areas identified for improvement. The management systems established last term have been maintained and developed and are becoming customary practice in the school. Robust performance management, linked with professional development, good assessment systems to track pupils' attainment and progress, and much improved professional relationships and partnerships with parents are supporting improvements in the quality of provision. Progress towards the targets set for improvement is closely monitored by the senior staff, the governing body and the RNIB. Further action is outlined in the latest school improvement plan which reflects the progress so far and the strategy for further improvement.

The governing body continues to provide rigorous, constructive challenge. Members understand the school's strengths and weaknesses, and are focused on supporting the school to become a centre of excellence. Its role as a critical friend is very effective. The work towards a formal partnership with Grangewood School has been very helpful in clarifying the role of the governing body and the other associated management groups in the new organisation. Clarity of responsibility is much improved, although a few of the grey areas of where responsibility and delegated powers lie have yet to be fully clarified.

The RNIB, Hillingdon local authority, and senior staff of Grangewood and Sunshine House have worked very hard to formalise their innovative partnership. This means that the two schools will continue to work together in a management structure based on the current, highly successful arrangement. The schools retain their own governing bodies and separate identities, but a new advisory Joint Committee, which includes representatives from both schools and stakeholders, will ensure that strategic and operational planning are well coordinated. Sunshine House has already benefited considerably from the long-established practice at Grangewood. This was judged to be outstanding in its December 2008 inspection. The partnership maximises opportunities for collaboration and brings benefits to both schools, and ultimately to the local and wider community. For example, pupils from both schools will benefit from the specialist facilities at Sunshine House, and will move between the two schools for particular timetabled activities. Other facilities, such as the currently underused residential provision at Sunshine House and the parent workshops at Grangewood, will be made available to both schools' communities. The partnership between the two schools has restored stability to the senior management structure of Sunshine House and has given it a secure base from which it can move forward with confidence.

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 – outstanding
- 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

In the last term, Sunshine House has received outstanding support in order to improve its provision, secure its future, and develop and grow. Action from the RNIB has speeded up considerably since the last monitoring visit. RNIB personnel have worked very hard in conjunction with Hillingdon local authority and senior managers of the two schools to develop the proposals for a formal partnership. At the same time, the RNIB's strategic committee has continued to oversee the implementation of Sunshine House's action plan, and has closely monitored the school's progress. The leadership, management and a range of other support provided by Grangewood School have been highly effective.