

Birkenhead High School Academy

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	135877
Local authority	Not Applicable
Inspection number	381945
Inspection dates	2–3 February 2012
Lead inspector	Jane Jones HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Academy
School category	Non-maintained
Age range of pupils	3–19
Gender of pupils	Girls
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Girls
Number of pupils on the school roll	842
Of which number on roll in the sixth form	133
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr N Lawrence
Headteacher	Mrs C Mann
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
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Introduction

Inspection team

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Her Majesty's Inspector
Additional inspector
Her Majesty's Inspector
Additional inspector

This inspection was carried out with two days' notice. Inspectors observed 41 teachers in 42 lessons, four of which were conducted jointly with senior or subject leaders. Meetings were held with groups of pupils from the Reception Year, each of Key Stages 1 to 4 and the sixth form, the Chair of the Governing Body, senior staff, subject leaders from the junior and senior schools, three progress leaders, and the special educational needs coordinator. An inspector heard four pupils read and talked to them about their reading. Informal discussions were held with pupils, staff and some parents/carers of nursery children. Inspectors observed the academy's work, and looked at management information, including self-evaluation documents, the academy improvement plan, assessment data, monitoring records, minutes of meetings of the governing body and samples of pupils' work. In planning the inspection, inspectors did not receive information from the online questionnaire (Parent View) as, so far, only one parent has used this service but they analysed questionnaires received from 196 parents/carers, 159 pupils and 54 staff. Of the parents' and carers' questionnaires, 54 were received from parents of girls in the senior school, which is a low proportion.

Information about the school

The academy opened in September 2009 in the buildings of the predecessor school, which was a fee-paying independent school for girls aged 3–19 years. Construction work for new buildings is currently underway. The academy's sponsor is the Girls' Day School Trust; governance is through an academy trust board and a local governing body. The Principal took up post in September 2010 and the vice-principal in April 2011. During the inspection, an appointment was made to a new senior post with responsibility for strategic leadership of the sixth form. The academy's specialisms are music and mathematics. The academy meets the current floor standard.

This all-age academy comprises a junior school for girls aged 3–11 and an 11–19 senior school. Numbers on roll are 298 in the junior school and 544 in the senior school. In the Nursery, 11 of the 26 children attend part-time. Currently, fewer girls are in Years 5, 10 and 11 than in other years. Around 10% of the girls are disabled or have special educational needs, which is lower than average. A low proportion, 4%, is known to be eligible for free school meals. Approximately 12% of the girls are of minority ethnic heritage. Very few speak English as an additional language.

The academy received a monitoring inspection in March 2011 and was judged to have made satisfactory progress in raising standards.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory and 4 is inadequate
 Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall Effectiveness	2
Achievement of pupils	2
Quality of teaching	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils	1
Leadership and management	2

Key Findings

- This academy provides a good education. From their earliest days in the junior school, the girls grow in confidence to become articulate, keen learners who enjoy participating in all that the academy offers, such as singing, music, sports and the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award. Those who join in Year 7 are inducted into the long-established ethos of excellent behaviour, good manners and positive attitudes. The rich range of extra-curricular activities adds significantly to the girls’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. While almost all girls, parents and carers are happy with the opportunities and education the academy provides, girls in the sixth form are less positive about their current experiences. The sixth form is satisfactory; an acknowledged priority for the academy is to establish a vibrant sixth-form identity and raise the quality of education.

- Standards of attainment are high overall throughout the academy but could be higher still if all the teaching was as good as the best. Diligent attitudes to learning mean that the girls nevertheless achieve well. They flourish when teaching is good or occasionally outstanding, as observed in the nursery and in music and drama lessons. Although teaching has strengthened since the monitoring visit in March 2011, around a half remains satisfactory. This is particularly so in the sixth form. Weaknesses generally relate to how the subject matter is developed, sometimes not building securely or rapidly enough on earlier learning, or not adopting teaching strategies that ensure each girl is actively involved and challenged.

- The Principal and the Chair of the Governing Body are openly ambitious for the academy and understand the collective journey for all. Substantial improvements have been made to leadership and management practices during the last 18 months. Neither the staff nor the girls have allowed the disruption caused by the building work to distract them from learning or from the drive to bring the academy in line with best practice nationally. Top priority has been given to the girls’ safety.

- Monitoring is now an established part of the academy’s work for leaders at all levels. The governing body is playing a full part in this, supporting and challenging the academy’s leaders. Robust systems track the girls’ progress and recent developments

to provide support and intervention are proving effective in helping girls to catch up and consolidate their learning. Monitoring of teaching is suitably linked to in-house professional development, although records and feedback to teachers do not give enough attention to learning and progress in the subject. The expertise of middle-level leaders varies, particularly in the insight shown into pinpointing the next steps to influence improvement.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality and consistency of teaching by ensuring teachers:
 - capitalise on the girls' positive attitudes to learning and strong communication skills to raise further expectations of their achievement and widening their active involvement in lessons
 - receive perceptive subject-specific feedback on their teaching, paying particular attention to early reading and mathematics in the junior school, and to extending and deepening learning in the senior school.
- Establish vibrant, modern sixth-form provision which has at its heart girls who:
 - make strong progress from their starting points to reach the highest standards
 - learn enthusiastically without over-reliance on and over-direction from staff
 - have the opportunity to participate in a wider range of courses and extra-curricular activities
 - are ambassadors for the development of the academy and more visible role models for younger girls.
- Develop middle leaders' skills in using the outcomes of monitoring to make strategic improvements to their area of responsibility and help subject leaders to promote more effective progression within their subject from ages 3 to 19 years.

Main Report

Achievement of pupils

Girls join the nursery with knowledge and skills at or above those typical for their age. Parents' and carers' comments on how quickly their children settled into school and soared in confidence and independence were borne out in sessions when girls happily chose their own activities or worked with an adult. They make good progress during the Early Years Foundation Stage, particularly in communication, language and literacy, but development in calculation and shape, space and measures is relatively weaker. Although standards in reading and writing are above average by the end of Key Stage 1, gaps in the teaching of phonics (linking sounds and letters) impede stronger development and detract from the girls' interest in reading. By Year 6, the girls have made good progress in English and achieve above average standards in national tests. They read aloud with meaning, good phrasing and tone. Strong teaching in writing, with attention to format and quality of content, is ensuring that girls write maturely and imaginatively across the curriculum, such as in history on 'waking up on Christmas morning in 1884'. Current work shows the potential for some girls to truly excel. In mathematics, standards in 2011 were broadly average for 11-year-olds. An over-reliance on a published scheme hampers girls' progress as it is not adapted to their potential for high attainment. Some good problem-solving activities have

been introduced but as yet they do not form an integral part of learning mathematics or make strong links with topics being studied.

Most girls make good progress between Key Stages 2 and 4. In 2011, almost all attained five or more GCSEs at A* to C including English and mathematics, but not all who had the potential gained A* and A grades. Attainment is also high in the sixth form, with two thirds of A-level entries awarded A* to B grades in 2011. However, this represented only satisfactory progress from the girls' strong GCSE starting points. Progress was stronger at AS level in Year 12 than at A level in Year 13. Throughout the academy, no group of girls, including those known to be eligible for free school meals or of minority ethnic heritage, does markedly better or worse than their peers.

The girls' strong skills in speaking and listening, reading and writing, hold them in good stead throughout their time in the academy. Coupled with a ready willingness to learn, cooperative behaviour and quickness to pick up new ideas, these strengths explain why learning and progress are stronger than the quality of teaching. Learning stalled when the work was insufficiently demanding or repetitive. For example, girls' quick grasp of topics in some mathematics lessons showed they were capable of far more challenging work. Learning was best when teachers' input was sharp and succinct, setting the stage for interesting, challenging activities. The girls became involved in discussion through the teachers' questioning, with follow-up questions encouraging refined or deeper responses. When teachers dominate the talk, the girls become passive, yet remain cooperative and complete the work set. This also typified learning in the sixth form where a 'lecturing' style was prominent.

The academy's improved use of data is enabling support and intervention to be provided for those girls who are having difficulty in reaching the expected standard. Breakfast clubs for these girls are proving very popular. Girls who are identified as disabled or having special educational needs are now receiving specialised support: this is an important whole-academy development.

Quality of teaching

The quality of teaching varies: the best is outstanding, quite a lot is good, but a half is satisfactory. The good or better practice spans the key stages and subjects, providing a platform for the next steps in improving teaching. Since March 2011, the academy's focus on improving teaching was evident in teachers' more effective use in lessons of assessment to support learning and increased opportunities for discussion and paired work.

An important characteristic of the better teaching was the teachers' high expectations of what each girl could achieve. Activities were chosen to make the girls think for themselves and/or work collaboratively, and sequenced to ensure new gains in knowledge, skills and understanding. The teachers' enthusiasm was infectious and reflected in the girls' responses as they persevered with the challenges set. Teachers circulated while the girls worked, providing timely one-to-one intervention to check, prompt and enable difficulties or misconceptions to be overcome. Effective use of assessment ensured that the girls knew what they were striving to achieve and how to achieve it. Reflection was promoted effectively in some lessons, for instance in English where girls were discussing the connotation of words within Christina Rossetti's poem *Sister Maude*. One girl identified 'comeliest corpse' as an oxymoron and why the character might have seen lost love as

beautiful. The group's challenging homework was to consider how the poem linked with the poet's religious views.

By contrast, satisfactory teaching often set expectations for the girls' learning that were clearly specified but lacked ambition, placing a ceiling on what was to be achieved, and/or took insufficient account of what the girls already knew or how quickly they learnt. In a few lessons, teachers showed an insecure grasp of how the girls' skills in problem solving or application of knowledge were to be developed or how progression over time might best be promoted. Such subject-specific weaknesses were not evident in the academy's own monitoring records. Where teachers dominated the talking, sometimes taking brief answers from a few volunteers, they were not able to assess how easy the girls found the work or how deep their understanding was, and hence adapt the lesson accordingly. In the sixth form, over-direction provided teachers with little insight into girls' understanding and, therefore, how subsequent work might be adapted. Such aspects weaken the otherwise strong strand running through the academy of teaching that fosters girls' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

Scrutiny of girls' books in several subjects showed the quality of marking varied widely with strengths in Key Stage 2 English books for example, but more often only brief comments such as 'well done' or a mark out of 10. It was not always clear why house points had been awarded or how girls could improve their work next time. A heavy reliance on commercial worksheets in many classes pointed to a narrowing of the curriculum in some subjects. Some worksheets were very repetitive and dull, particularly in mathematics.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The girls' behaviour and attitudes to learning are outstanding. This was evident throughout the inspection but was backed up by the views expressed by the vast majority of parents and carers, staff and the girls themselves in questionnaires and in discussions with inspectors. No girl has ever been excluded. The girls behave responsibly, showing politeness, consideration and friendliness, and a mature awareness of how to keep themselves and others safe. Their behaviour around the site with its restrictions due to the building work was exemplary.

A few questionnaires from parents/carers and girls indicated that instances of bullying were sometimes not dealt with effectively. However, all the groups of girls who spoke to inspectors said that there was no bullying but that sometimes girls fell out with each other which led to instances of name calling which the staff dealt with firmly. As one Year 6 pupil said, 'being kind to each other is our first rule'. The girls said they feel safe in the academy; this is echoed by the responses in 100% of the parents' and carers' questionnaires and 98% of the girls'.

Attendance is above average although slightly lower this year than last, particularly in Year 13. The girls are punctual at the start of the day and for lessons.

Leadership and management

Throughout a period of considerable change and growth, the academy has successfully managed to sustain a highly positive ethos, underpinned by traditional values and rich educational experiences, and high standards in external assessments. The curriculum and range of extra-curricular activities are good and make a significant impact on the girls'

spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Some events reach out into the local community. During the inspection, girls were enjoying activities relating to 'the Gothic' in readiness for the forthcoming literary festival with visiting authors. A music festival was taking place the day after the inspection.

Leadership and management systems and practices have become established, and are clearly aimed at securing sustained improvement of provision and outcomes for the girls, ensuring all have equality of opportunity and are not subject to discrimination. The current requirements for safeguarding are met and high priority has been given to girls' safety and well-being during the construction work on site. Senior leadership has been strengthened by the appointment of the vice-principal from April 2011 and a new appointment to lead sixth-form development was finalised during the inspection.

Self-evaluation by the Principal and senior leaders is accurate with appropriate priorities identified in the academy's development plan, backed up by a set of 'Rapid Action Plans' that ensure attention is focused on specific issues. The development plan contains clear actions, details of how their implementation is to be monitored and impact gauged, although not all success criteria are easily measured. Progress has been made on all the priorities for improvement set at the monitoring visit in March 2011 and those identified by the academy. Cross-phase working between the junior and senior schools has begun. Middle-level leaders have become more proficient at monitoring through a range of activities, such as 'learning walks' and scrutiny of girls' work. However, records tend to focus on generic aspects rather than subject-specific detail, and the information gleaned is not consistently prompting questions about, for instance, the quality of teaching or the curriculum.

The Chair of the Governing Body understands clearly the central importance of teaching and learning. He has increased the involvement of the local governors in monitoring the academy's progress. Members of the governing body provide well-informed challenge and support for the academy. Systems for gathering the views of parents and the girls have been improved. The questionnaires completed by parents/carers were very positive. The highest level of disagreement, at 9%, was with regard to the academy keeping them informed. In a few instances, additional comments provided related this to curriculum matters.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	46	46	8	0
Primary schools	8	47	40	5
Secondary schools	14	38	40	8
Special schools	28	48	20	4
Pupil referral units	15	50	29	5
All schools	11	46	38	6

New school inspection arrangements have been introduced from 1 January 2012. This means that inspectors make judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2010 to 31 August 2011 and represent judgements that were made under the school inspection arrangements that were introduced on 1 September 2009. These data are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Primary schools include primary academy converters. Secondary schools include secondary academy converters, sponsor-led academies and city technology colleges. Special schools include special academy converters and non-maintained special schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning and development taking account of their attainment.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Behaviour	how well pupils behave in lessons, with emphasis on their attitude to learning. Pupils' punctuality to lessons and their conduct around the school.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving based on its self-evaluation and what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the governors and headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.
Safety	how safe pupils are in school, including in lessons; and their understanding of risks. Pupils' freedom from bullying and harassment. How well the school promotes safety, for example e-learning.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



6 February 2012

Dear Girls

Inspection of Birkenhead High School Academy, Wirral, CH43 1TY

Thank you, on behalf of the inspection team, for being so polite and friendly when we visited recently. We enjoyed observing your lessons and were interested to hear about all the things you do in the academy and what you think about it.

There are many good things about your academy. Here are some that we found.

- Your behaviour and attitudes to learning are excellent. The new building is looking very exciting but you have not allowed the building work to get in the way of learning. You are a credit to yourselves and to the academy and everyone is rightly proud of you. You are considerate and friendly: you treat each other well and know how to keep them and you safe.
- All of you, the youngest to the oldest, do well in tests and examinations. The inspection team believes that you could do even better and we are encouraging the teachers to think so too. You try hard in lessons, even when the things you are given to do are a bit dull or easy. You are particularly good at using your speaking, listening and literacy skills in all of your subjects.
- You told us how much you enjoy the academy and especially the extra activities, such as music and sports. Those of you in the sixth form were less positive about life in the academy.
- The academy has been through a lot of change in the last 18 months or so. Leaders, including governors, have become more up-to-date in the ways the best schools work. Staff are keeping a close eye on your progress and giving support to those of you who need a bit of extra help.

The Principal, staff and governors are keen to improve some things even more. Here are the recommendations that we have made.

- To make sure that, in every subject, you are challenged in lessons to think hard and take part in interesting activities.
- To make the sixth form an interesting, modern and successful place to study.
- To help those staff in charge of subjects and other parts of the academy's work to be better at improving things.

We are sure that you will also want to help. Why don't you tell them your ideas too? I look forward to hearing good things about you and your academy in the future.

Yours sincerely

Jane Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

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