

# Birches Head High School

## Inspection report

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<b>Unique Reference Number</b>	124390
<b>Local Authority</b>	Stoke-On-Trent
<b>Inspection number</b>	359652
<b>Inspection dates</b>	25–26 May 2011
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Judith Matharu HMI

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

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<b>Type of school</b>	Secondary
<b>School category</b>	Community
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–16
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	745
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Mrs Barbara Miller
<b>Headteacher</b>	Ms Karen Healey
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
<b>School address</b>	Birches Head Road Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent Staffordshire ST2 8DD
<b>Telephone number</b>	01782 233595
<b>Fax number</b>	01782 236647
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## Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three additional inspectors. They observed 34 lessons taught by 33 teachers, including four joint observations conducted with members of the senior leadership team. They held meetings with staff, a representative of the governing body and groups of students. Inspectors observed the school's work, and looked at school documentation including information about students' attendance and progress, improvement plans, school policies, teaching records, health and safety information and an analysis of 28 parental questionnaires.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- Inspectors considered the progress being made by all students, particularly in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science at Key Stage 4.
- They determined the quality of teaching and whether this is suitably challenging for students of all abilities.
- They considered the curriculum and its suitability in meeting the needs of all students.
- Inspectors also focused on leadership and management at all levels and the effectiveness of this in driving and sustaining improvement across the school.

## Information about the school

Birches Head High School is a comprehensive school of smaller-than-average size serving a diverse community in the central area of the city. The school gained Foundation and Trust status with a range of partners in January 2010.

The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is above the national average as is the number of students with a statement of special educational needs. The proportion with special educational needs and/or disabilities overall is significantly above the national average. The majority of students are of White British backgrounds with an increasing number from a wide range of minority ethnic backgrounds. An above-average number of students arrive and leave at different times during the school year.

The school provides a range of extended services for the use of students and the local community. It currently holds Healthy School status, Sportsmark status, the Quality Mark for Basic Skills and the Quality in Study Support at Level 2.

**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: how good is the school?**

**2**

**The school's capacity for sustained improvement**

**2**

## Main findings

Birches Head has steadily and consistently improved to become a good school. Purposeful direction from the headteacher and senior team and improved leadership from subject and departmental heads have ensured that the school's improvement strategies have made a positive impact on provision and outcomes for students since the last inspection. There is a strong conviction that securing improvements in teaching and developing the range and quality of the curriculum to engage students more effectively are the cornerstones of success. This, together with strong pastoral care that nurtures students and a consistently good level of support encourages students to give their best; consequently, behaviour, attitudes to learning and the progress students make are good. Attainment for all groups of students has improved to around the national average.

The innovative curriculum and good quality of care, guidance and support ensure that the needs of all students are well met. Consequently, students enjoy their learning, respond positively to their teachers and feel they are well cared for and encouraged to achieve their best. A key factor in the school's steady improvement is the close attention paid to tracking and monitoring students' progress. The information gathered is used very well to retain a sustained focus on key groups and individual students, closely monitor their progress and inform where interventions are necessary.

Despite the significant improvements that have been made, the school acknowledges that some areas of inconsistency remain. There are some variations in attainment and progress in the core subjects. For example, performance in mathematics is not as good as that achieved in English and science. There is some inconsistency too, in the achievements of the relatively small number of more-able students who do not always achieve the higher grades that might reasonably be expected. Furthermore, although teaching is securely good overall, there remain some inconsistencies in performance with a small amount of satisfactory teaching evident.

The school has good capacity to sustain current levels of performance and improve further. This arises from:

- the good track record of improvements that school leaders have achieved since the last inspection report
- accurate self-evaluation at all levels prompting appropriate sharply focused improvement plans
- a critical mass of enthusiastic and determined staff members who understand the school's context, know where the school is aiming and are involved in striving to attain these goals.

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## What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Accelerate attainment and progression rates in mathematics so that these match those made by students in the other core subjects. Ensure that all teachers support this by reinforcing numeracy skills whenever appropriate across the curriculum.
- Ensure that the most able students are challenged to achieve the very highest grades.
- Eliminate the small amount of teaching and learning that remains satisfactory and increase the proportion that is outstanding by:
  - ensuring that the level of challenge provided through learning activities is consistently varied and appropriate for the range of abilities in the class
  - ensuring that direct whole-class teaching, including explanations, is not overly long, but consistently sharp, relevant and well-focused
  - avoiding an overly relaxed style when the pace of learning drops
  - disseminating best practice across the school.

## Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

**2**

In 2010, attainment at Key Stage 4 improved to the national average for most indicators. The attainment of key groups is on a rising trend and is now broadly average. Boys' attainment indicates a smaller-than-average gap between boys and girls. The attainment of vulnerable groups, including students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is above that seen nationally for similar groups. Attainment in English and mathematics for all groups has steadily improved in the last three years, albeit at a greater rate in English than in mathematics. Although, the school's reliable tracking indicates an anticipated increase in the number of 'A' grades this year, there is still work to do to increase the proportion of the highest grades.

Students join the school with below-average attainment. The rate of progress they make over time has steadily improved in recent years and is now good. The steady improvement in attainment to 2010 and the school's projections for 2011, based on module and early entry results, together with the good progress observed at inspection support this. The progress of individual groups of students, including those from minority ethnic groups and for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is similarly good. Students' attitudes to learning are positive. This is reflected in the lessons observed during the inspection. Students are responsive to their teachers' encouragement, work at a good pace and are prepared to contribute well to discussions; the vast majority of students are interested learners who are eager to do well. However, progress in mathematics, although improving is not as good as for other subjects, notably in English and science where significant improvements have been achieved.

Attendance has improved to the national average in recent years and remains so, despite the school's robust efforts to improve this further. A small number of students, including several newcomers to the school, are resistant to the school's ongoing efforts to improve their attendance. Other outcomes for students are good. It is early days but the newly introduced vertical tutoring system is encouraging positive relationships and a strong sense of cohesion across the school. Strategies to promote good behaviour have been

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largely successful; consequently, the number of exclusions has reduced. There are few bullying incidents; students are confident that should these occur they will be dealt with swiftly.

Students are proud of their school and take pleasure in participating in a variety of activities beyond the school day. They are effective members of their community and many are involved in leadership activities, for example in school 'action teams' providing advice on learning and developing school policies or working in the local community as sports or dance leaders or on charity fund-raising events.

Students demonstrate good awareness of the value of diverse cultures and of moral and social issues as a result of their involvement in a wide range of community action projects and a strong curriculum focus on these themes. Students have well-developed spiritual awareness gained through various opportunities for reflection and the ability to empathise with others, inspired by their studies through the creative curriculum. Overall, students collaborate well, and demonstrate a range of skills, attitudes and competences that prepare them well for their future working lives.

*These are the grades for pupils' outcomes*

<b>Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning</b>	<b>2</b>
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment <sup>1</sup>	3
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
<b>The extent to which pupils feel safe</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Pupils' behaviour</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being</b>	<b>2</b>
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance <sup>1</sup>	3
<b>The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development</b>	<b>2</b>

<sup>1</sup> The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

**How effective is the provision?**

The attention paid to improving teaching across the school has resulted in significant improvements over time. Consequently, the majority of teaching is now good. Teachers

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consistently demonstrate good subject knowledge. They plan their lessons in detail, incorporating a variety of suitable activities and using technology well to enhance learning. Relationships with students are highly positive, creating a positive environment for learning. Teachers are encouraging and supportive in their approaches. They check frequently on students' understanding and employ a range of suitable assessment techniques; this helps students to gain a clear understanding of the levels they are working at and what is required to improve their work. Marking is generally regular and helpful. Many teachers have benefited from sharing their expertise and ideas on improving teaching with their colleagues and there is good capacity to develop this further.

Many of the best features evident in teaching were apparent in an outstanding science lesson at inspection. The teacher had planned an interesting practical lesson exploring mitosis and cell division. She used a variety of innovative approaches, starting with a humorous song that explained the principles of DNA to motivate the students and then challenged them to make their own DNA models using cocktail sticks and jelly babies. The teacher's explanations were clear and precise; students were in no doubt as to her high expectations. Relationships were excellent with appropriate levels of both challenge and support provided. Students' understanding was probed through skilful questioning in order to assess their progress as the lesson developed. The students worked with interest, their responses displaying very good understanding of complex material. In all, the rate of progress and quality of the learning were outstanding. Occasionally, when learning is less effective, the tasks are not varied or matched well enough to the range of abilities of students. This results in a slowing of progress for some students and does not challenge the relatively small number of more-able learners to move on swiftly enough. Teachers sometimes talk for too long so that students' attention wanes and they become restless. At other times, the atmosphere is too relaxed and some students interpret this as a signal that the expectations of them are less than they might be.

The curriculum is successful in providing a variety of good learning opportunities for all students. It is flexible and innovative, having been suitably adapted to meet the needs and aptitudes of students more fully. At Key Stage 3, the 'Futures Curriculum' is effective in developing students' key skills and providing a solid platform for future learning. The Key Stage 4 curriculum is suitably varied and personalised through excellent collaboration with a range of external partners to meet students' differing needs and aspirations. A wide variety of vocational pathways ensures that all students can achieve, including a significant number who have failed in other institutions. Exemplary partnership working is promoting highly positive outcomes for students.

The quality of support, care and guidance for students is good. Pastoral care is strong, students are well known to staff and their needs are carefully considered. Excellent care is taken of students whose circumstances may have made them vulnerable in order to minimise the barriers to their learning. The work in partnership with a range of external agencies is well coordinated with effective interventions made to support individual students at risk of underachievement or disaffection. The impact of this work is commendable; for example, last year, every Year 11 student progressed to employment, further education or training.

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*These are the grades for the quality of provision*

<b>The quality of teaching</b>	<b>2</b>
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
<b>The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of care, guidance and support</b>	<b>2</b>

## How effective are leadership and management?

Purposeful leadership has brought about many improvements in the school's work since the last inspection. The headteacher and senior team provide strong, thoughtful direction in driving school improvement; there is a sharp focus on the effective use of performance data to track students' achievements, careful attention paid to improving teaching across the school, together with a creative approach to curriculum development. One of the key strengths is the sustained focus on robust tracking and analysis of the performance of all students and well-focused strategies to successfully close the gaps in the performance of different groups, particularly those who are most vulnerable. Leadership is distributed well and middle leaders have grown in confidence and effectiveness. They make a good contribution; demonstrating secure understanding of their roles and responsibilities for driving improvement at a department level.

The monitoring and evaluation of teaching is robust and accurate, as endorsed at inspection. Monitoring includes lesson observations, work scrutinies and interviews with students. This has remained an ongoing focus for attention with a variety of useful professional development activities, such as coaching, introduced to improve teaching to a consistently good level. There is considerable impact of this approach with a significant number of teachers improving the quality of their work to the next level, as observed at inspection.

The school understands its local community well and makes considerable efforts to communicate with parents and carers, including those who are difficult to reach. Although very few parents responded to the questionnaire at inspection, the school's own evidence of regular consultations with parents indicates their approval with and general support for the school's work. A cohesive school community has been established; extensive work undertaken with a variety of community partners encourages students to extend their horizons beyond the school and support a range of community activities, both locally and further afield. Consequently, the contribution made to community cohesion is good.

Members of the governing body are well informed about the school's strengths and areas for improvement and are well organised so that they can discharge their statutory role and responsibilities efficiently. They strongly endorse the inclusive nature of the school and the support provided for vulnerable students to minimise the barriers to success. Close attention is given to supporting students' well-being. Safeguarding procedures are good with detailed record-keeping and robust, carefully monitored policies and procedures in place to keep students safe. The management of safeguarding is strong with an excellent programme of training in place for members of staff.



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*These are the grades for leadership and management*

<b>The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement</b>	<b>2</b>
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
<b>The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money</b>	<b>2</b>

## Views of parents and carers

A very small number of parents and carers responded to the questionnaire at inspection. Of those that did respond, the majority are positive about the school's work.

A small number of parents feel that the school does not deal with unacceptable behaviour well. Inspectors considered behaviour carefully and also looked at records of incidents involving poor behaviour. Behaviour was noted to be consistently good from the vast majority of students in lessons and around the school at social times with no concerns evident. Instances of poor behaviour are rigorously followed up with appropriate sanctions applied.

## Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Birches Head High School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 28 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 745 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	9	32	14	50	3	11	2	7
The school keeps my child safe	11	39	14	50	1	4	2	7
My school informs me about my child's progress	10	36	11	39	6	21	1	4
My child is making enough progress at this school	11	39	9	32	5	18	2	7
The teaching is good at this school	9	32	15	54	1	4	3	11
The school helps me to support my child's learning	7	25	12	43	6	21	2	7
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	6	21	18	64	2	7	1	4
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	10	36	14	50	1	4	2	7
The school meets my child's particular needs	8	29	15	54	3	11	2	7
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	6	21	14	50	4	14	3	11
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	5	18	14	50	3	11	4	14
The school is led and managed effectively	9	32	14	50	1	4	3	11
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	8	29	15	54	3	11	2	7

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

## 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	48	6	0
Primary schools	6	47	40	7
Secondary schools	12	39	38	11
Sixth forms	13	42	41	3
Special schools	28	49	19	4
Pupil referral units	14	45	31	10
All schools	10	46	37	7

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2010 to 31 December 2010 and are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://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.

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

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

## Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on 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 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:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.</li><li>■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.</li><li>■ The quality of teaching.</li><li>■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships.</li><li>■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.</li></ul>
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.

**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.**



27 May 2011

Dear Students

**Inspection of Birches Head High School, Stoke-on-Trent, ST2 8DD**

Thank you for your warm welcome when we inspected your school recently. We enjoyed talking with many of you and hearing your views.

We found that your school is steadily and securely improving; it is now good with a number of key strengths. The teaching you receive is consistently good and the vast majority of you respond positively in behaving well and are therefore making good progress overall. School leaders have worked particularly hard on providing a suitably varied curriculum that meets your needs, enabling you to follow courses that inspire your interest and motivate you.

We enjoyed hearing about your 'action teams' and the many opportunities you have to lead and take responsibility. You are well guided and supported; it was clear to us how well your needs are met and the close eye kept on your progress and development. Your headteacher leads a strong senior team very well and maintains a clear vision for the future development of your school. The momentum for ongoing improvement has been sustained and there is a real will to continue this in the future.

With this in mind, we have asked your staff to:

- improve performance and results in mathematics to the same level of English and science
- ensure that those of you who find learning easy are challenged to achieve the highest grades
- further strengthen teaching so that more of it matches the best we saw.

You can support this by attending regularly, giving your best and taking advantage of the extensive opportunities available to you.

We wish you every success in the future.

Yours sincerely

Judith Matharu

Her Majesty's Inspector

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