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19 June 2013

Mr A Birchall
Headteacher
The Byrchall High School
Warrington Road
Wigan
Lancashire
WN4 9PQ

Dear Mr Birchall

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Byrchall High School, Wigan

Following my visit to your academy accompanied by Philippa Darley HMI on 18 June 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings of my visit. Thank you for the help you gave us and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the academy since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in April 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders, students, members of the Governing Body and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The academy action plan and self-evaluation summary were evaluated alongside your 'Actions and Impact' document.

Context

Since your last inspection you have appointed a new head of science.

Main findings

Your own academy data and self-evaluation summary indicate some improvements in achievement across a range of subjects and show good achievement in mathematics. Data suggest that gaps in attainment between more disadvantaged students and their peers, are beginning to close. However, your self-evaluation rightly points out that achievement in English and science needs to improve further to be at least in-line with achievement in mathematics. It also notes that the proportion of students attaining the highest grades across the curriculum, and the achievement of those with special educational needs is too low because teachers' expectations are too low.

Students told us that they enjoyed most of their lessons, particularly in mathematics and physical education but that there were some inconsistencies in the quality of teaching. They would like to see more variety in the tasks they are given in English and be given more one-to-one help in science. Year 8 students would like to do more challenging and interesting work, rather than continuing the work they began in Year 7. Students enjoyed lessons the most where the teacher demonstrated enthusiasm for the subject and related it to real life. Some expressed the concern that less confident students found it difficult to ask for and receive one-to-one attention from their teachers.

Senior leaders expressed the view that many teachers had lost confidence in their teaching abilities but that they had benefited greatly from a recent training session from the academy's resident inspector. The resident inspector has also helped teachers to understand how to develop their marking and this has led to some clear improvements. You have also encouraged teachers to reflect higher aspirations by referring to 'minimum expected grades' rather than 'target grades'.

Students behave very well around the academy and in lessons. They told us how much they appreciate the wide range of extra-curricular activities which I know you monitor carefully to ensure all have a chance to participate.

You, your senior team and the Governing Body concede that leaders and managers had over-estimated how well the academy was doing and had 'taken their eye off the ball' between inspections. It is evident that middle leaders have performed well when the spotlight was on their work but were more complacent and less accountable for the performance of their teams when the spotlight shone elsewhere.

The academy action plan concentrates on the key areas for improvement but is overly long, sometimes repetitive and lacks focus on the priorities for action. It is unclear how the range of groups such as the Standards and Effectiveness Committee, the Progress Group, the Joint Professional Development Group, the High Attainers Focus Group and other improvement teams will interact and communicate to achieve agreed goals.

Senior leaders, governors and the local authority are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The academy should take further action to:

- redraft the action plan to ensure it focuses clearly on the areas for improvement and is simple to evaluate in terms of outcomes achieved
- take advantage of local authority support to link with outstanding schools and departments

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The support offered by the local authority is extensive and needs to be taken full advantage of. It has already funded some linking work between the English department and an outstanding practitioner in a local school and is prepared to broker and fund further school linking work with outstanding schools across the authority.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and as below.

Yours sincerely

Janet Palmer

Her Majesty's Inspector