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Ms Karen Healey
Headteacher
Birches Head High School
Birches Head Road
Hanley
Stoke-on-Trent
Staffordshire
ST2 8DD

Dear Ms Healey

Special measures monitoring inspection of Birches Head High School

Following my visit to your school on 13 May 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in December 2013.

Evidence

During this inspection, I met with you and your senior team, the subject leaders for English and mathematics, two members of the governing body and two representatives of the local authority. I evaluated the combined local authority statement of action and school action plan.

Context

Since the section 5 inspection, the governing body has been reconstituted. An assistant vice-Principal with responsibilities for literacy and English took up post two weeks ago. The school has appointed six new teachers to replace those who are

leaving. Birches Head staff are working with two teaching schools: George Spencer Academy and St Joseph's College.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

You have led your team to act decisively on the areas identified for improvement at the most recent inspection. The school's action plan, which is combined with the local authority's statement of action, focuses on exactly what needs to be tackled to improve the quality of teaching, students' achievement and behaviour, and the quality of leadership. The planned timescales are appropriate and the recent appointment of a senior leader responsible for developing students' literacy skills means that the intensity of work in this area can increase. Senior leaders are regularly checking how much progress is being made in the areas of the school's work for which they are responsible and gathering a suitably wide range of evidence to do so. The summary of progress reports that leaders complete show that improvements are beginning to be made in all aspects identified by the inspection team. However, these reports are not consistently evaluative; some have too much description and not enough evaluation of the impact. In part, this is because some of the success criteria are too vague and therefore not easily measurable. We discussed how these could be sharpened.

Senior leaders are tackling weaknesses in the quality of teaching through providing training and support, as well as using the school's formal procedures to manage teachers' performance. The school's records show that there are improvements in teaching, but that there continues to be too much teaching that is not yet good; this is within as well as between subjects. Observations of teaching are frequent and while there are often detailed records of those observations, these do not always have enough emphasis on the impact that teaching is having on students', and groups of students', learning. An analysis of the current Year 11 students' levels of achievement indicates that these should improve on the previous year, but that their overall achievement is also likely to be inadequate. I agree with the school's plans to make sure that subject leaders evaluate how well students are achieving against measures of expected and good progress at Key Stage 3, as already happens at Key Stage 4. Leaders acknowledge that while absence rates are falling, students in this school are absent more frequently than is the case nationally. There has been a concerted focus to increase expectations of students' attitudes to learning in lessons and the school's records indicate that this is reducing the incidents of poorer behaviour. I will consider the impact of this and other aspects of the school's work in more detail at my next visit.

A review of governance has been completed which identified helpful areas for improvement and these are in the process of being implemented. An external review

of the school's use of the pupil premium funding is about to finish and you have agreed to send the report to me by e-mail. The evidence you provided and my discussion with two governors indicate that governors are asking increasingly challenging questions of school leaders and, as a result, are developing a more thorough understanding of the school's work. More explicit reference is needed in school improvement planning documentation to confirm how the restructured governing body will be monitoring the school's progress. You are working with governors to ensure that data about students' achievement and other aspects are presented in a clear and concise way. All of the information provided to governors must have national comparisons, where these are available.

The local authority is regularly monitoring the school's progress and you agree that officers are providing a good level of challenge and support. I discussed with you and the local authority the need for any externally commissioned reports to include sufficient evaluation of the school's work and the progress being made against the areas for improvement.

Following the monitoring inspection the following judgements were made:

The combined local authority statement of action and school action plan is fit for purpose.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Corporate Director of People Services for Stoke-on-Trent. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely,

James McNeillie
Her Majesty's Inspector