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29 January 2015

Mrs Roisin Maguire
Consultant Headteacher
Birches Head Academy
Birches Head Road
Hanley
Stoke-on-Trent
ST2 8DD

Dear Mrs Maguire

Special measures monitoring inspection of Birches Head Academy

Following my visit with Helen Reeves, Additional Inspector, to your school on 27 and 28 January 2015, 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in December 2013. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time: the school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

The school may appoint one more newly qualified teacher in English and one newly qualified teacher in history before the next monitoring inspection. Any further appointments can be made only in consultation with me.

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

Yours sincerely

James McNeillie
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in December 2013

- Improve teaching to at least a good quality so that standards in all subjects, especially in English and mathematics, rise significantly by:
 - eradicating inadequate teaching through rigorous monitoring and taking prompt action
 - raising teachers' expectations of what all students can achieve so that students are motivated, interested and develop better attitudes to learning
 - improving teachers' questioning so that students are challenged to think more deeply
 - improving the quality and impact of marking so that helpful advice is offered and higher expectations are set for the quantity and quality of work in students' books.

- Improve the management of behaviour in lessons by:
 - ensuring systems for rewarding good behaviour are effective and all teachers follow agreed procedures for managing behaviour in lessons
 - ensuring all teachers deal effectively with low-level disruption.

- Improve literacy and numeracy across all subjects by:
 - ensuring all teachers take full responsibility for the teaching of literacy and numeracy skills within their lessons
 - ensuring that students respond to requests in their books for work to be corrected, improved or re-written
 - developing better questioning and discussion in class so that students get more opportunities to develop their vocabulary and speaking skills
 - fostering the pleasures of reading across the school
 - ensuring there are enough opportunities for extended writing in all subjects
 - implementing an agreed numeracy policy so that all teachers plan for numeracy development whenever appropriate in their lessons.

- Urgently strengthen the effectiveness of leadership, management and governance by:
 - ensuring senior leaders rigorously tackle key weaknesses in the quality of teaching and learning and decisively attend to the way in which behaviour is managed
 - focusing lesson observations on what the students are learning, rather than on what the teacher is doing
 - developing the skills of subject and department leaders to enable them to take a more active role in raising achievement
 - ensuring the governing body holds leaders more closely to account for improving the quality of teaching and achievement
 - undertaking an external review of governance in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved

- conducting an external review of the school's use of the pupil premium spending.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 27 to 28 January 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the consultant headteacher, the assistant consultant headteacher, other senior leaders, the Chair of the Governing Body and two other governors, groups of students and two representatives from the local authority.

Context

Immediately after my last monitoring inspection, the consultant headteacher took on overall responsibility for the school and spends at least two days each week in the school. The assistant consultant headteacher spends three days in the school. An assistant vice-Principal left at the end of last term and the subject leader for English took up post in January 2015.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The school's vision 'Aspire to be More' is emerging in some signs that students' achievement is beginning to improve. For example, the school's records show that the current Year 11 students are making some better progress when compared to the students who left the school in the summer of 2014. Leaders are fully aware that, despite these slight improvements, Year 11 students are still very likely to leave with GCSE results that are well below national averages. Targeted support for students to develop the necessary skills in readiness for examinations in a range of subjects are taking place after school. There is a determination, and some evidence of success, to do everything possible to accelerate these students' progress from a legacy of underachievement.

These signs of improvement are also beginning to show in the progress of students from Years 7 to 10. Previous concerns about the accuracy of teacher assessments are being tackled through in-school training and external verification. Senior leaders are keeping a close eye on this to check that improvements are continuing.

Leaders have established higher expectations of what students can and should achieve. For example, there is now a minimum expectation that all students, irrespective of their levels of ability or particular needs, will make good progress rather than just what is nationally expected.

Students describe that some of their classmates have improved attitudes to learning and this is helping them to learn better. However, there continues to be poor behaviour that is having a detrimental impact on students' achievement; inspectors observed this and students also described this.

The poor levels of many students' literacy skills continue to be a barrier to their good achievement. While leaders have addressed this since my last monitoring inspection the impact is not yet strong enough. Students are still making basic errors of spelling, punctuation and grammar and teachers are not consistently helping students to address these.

The quality of teaching

There are some improvements to the quality of teaching since the last monitoring inspection. However, leaders are only too aware that there is much still to do to make sure that teaching is good enough.

Many teachers still do not have high enough expectations of students. They are not planning well enough to take into account what students already know and can do, and the key skills, knowledge and understanding that they need to learn or be developed. Lesson planning sheets show that teachers are expected to consider these aspects but the application of this expectation is not good enough. For example, in some lessons, students with lower levels of skills are just expected to do less or an easier task. Some teachers are also not planning well enough for what students need to learn rather than do. Other aspects of low expectations are in relation to the presentation of students' written work and the willingness of some teachers to allow low-level disruption to continue.

Teachers' effective use of assessment in lessons and over time is variable. Sometimes, teachers just accept that students understand because all of them have put their thumbs up, without checking that this is accurate. The quality of marking has improved but is also inconsistent and too often students are not acting on the advice that teachers provide. This is particularly evident in relation to developing students' accurate literacy skills.

Inspectors' observations of teaching and scrutiny of students' work books and the school's records show that there is good teaching that is helping students make quicker progress than they have done in the past. Teachers have good subject knowledge. In a Year 9 history lesson, the teacher's passion for and knowledge of the subject and excellent questioning resulted in students being motivated and allowed them to develop their understanding of the challenges that faced world leaders after World War One. In a music lesson, students with different levels of ability could all develop their skills in playing the piano because the teacher had considered in advance how this could be achieved. There were some good examples of marking in a range of subjects, including in English and mathematics, which gave students very clear areas for improvement.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Behaviour is improving. There is a calmer atmosphere in the school and students are increasingly showing better attitudes to learning in lessons. The school's careful and detailed records of students' behaviour over time confirm this. Students also told inspectors that behaviour was improving, although they did say that this was still not the case all of the time. There are still examples of poor behaviour that are limiting students' learning in lessons.

A criticism in my last monitoring inspection letter was that students lack interest or enthusiasm in their learning. Inspectors continued to observe this and teachers also described this as a worry. However, as a result of better teaching there is beginning to be more engagement in learning. The strongest engagement is when teachers make learning interesting and relevant, and when students understand what they need to learn. There are some particular groups of students in Key Stage 3 who are causing the same difficulties in a range of subjects, including for experienced teachers. Leaders are deploying a range of strategies to tackle this but at the time of my visit it was too early to evaluate the impact. A feature of students' behaviour that requires quick improvement relates to them being prepared for learning. Too many are arriving to school and at lessons without the correct equipment. For example, one group of Year 10 girls had no pens or pencils for their day at school and inspectors observed other students writing in felt tip pen.

Movement around the school was generally orderly during the inspection. Students, teachers and support staff described this to be typical. During social times, some students are not particularly aware of each other or their surroundings and the impact their behaviour has. For example, one older boy threw a football to his friend which narrowly missed other boys and a member of staff's car. While not done maliciously, this lack of awareness has the potential for causing difficulties for others. Leaders need to work with students on building this self-awareness.

Students from different backgrounds generally get on well together in lessons and during social times. The students inspectors spoke to had mixed views about bullying in school and how it was dealt with. This ranged from describing it as never happening to some, mainly girls, who felt that teasing and friendship issues cause them unhappiness. However, none of the many students inspectors spoke to described feeling unsafe in school.

There has been an increase in the number of fixed-term exclusions since my last monitoring inspection and two students permanently excluded from school. These link to leaders' increased expectations of acceptable behaviour. Leaders' monitoring, evaluation and analysis of behaviour patterns continue to be well developed.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The consultant headteacher and the assistant consultant headteacher have galvanised senior leaders and staff to make changes to the way they work and the systems used to monitor and track the progress students make. Those staff who spoke to inspectors described how these two senior leaders had helped to set a clear direction, outlined expectations and increased levels and systems for accountability. In a short space of time, there have been some quick improvements. The revised school improvement plan sets out how leaders will raise the aspirations of students and staff.

The roles of senior leaders have been clarified and these leaders described feeling empowered to do their job while also knowing that they would be held to account. For example, senior leaders in charge of improving teaching and students' achievement could identify clear impact of their work and knew which aspects still need to be developed.

Leaders continue to monitor the quality of teaching and take action to support and challenge teachers where the impact of their work is not good enough. However, there has also been an increased focus on celebrating success in teaching and this has allowed leaders to identify where there is particularly strong practice that can be shared with other teachers.

The subject leaders inspectors met with welcomed the streamlined tracking of students' progress and the periods of additional support for students that followed the gathering of this information. The subject leader for English, although only in the fourth week at the school at the time of this inspection, has identified key aspects that need to be developed, including in reviewing the curriculum at Key Stage 3 so that skills can be built from the very start of students' secondary education. Leaders of subjects are becoming increasingly effective at raising standards and aspirations.

Governors continue to gather first-hand evidence of the impact of the school's work and provide appropriate challenge to leaders.

A Year 11 student expressed his disappointment that, while things are improving across the school, 'It's a shame because it's too late for us'. While in many senses this sentiment is true, leaders and teachers are determined that all students, including those in their last year of school, will make better progress than they have done previously.

External support

The local authority continues to provide good challenge and support to the school, including agreeing to provide considerable additional funding to enable the school's improvement plan to be put into action.

Leaders and teachers value working with colleagues from St Joseph's College and see this as a partnership. The impact of this can be seen in the improving quality of teaching.