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4 June 2015

Ms Katie Dixon
Headteacher
Birches Head Academy
Birches Head Road
Stoke-on-Trent
ST2 8DD

Dear Ms Dixon

Special measures monitoring inspection of Birches Head Academy

Following my visit with Simon Mosley, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 2 and 3 June 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 academy's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the fourth monitoring inspection since the academy 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 academy is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

The academy may appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

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 Acting Executive Director - People 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 fourth monitoring inspection on 2-3 June 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the consultant headteacher, senior and middle leaders, the Chair of the Governing Body and one other governor, two representatives of the local authority, groups of students and with one parent.

Context

The headteacher was appointed in April 2015 having previously been a vice-Principal at the academy. A deputy headteacher has been appointed to start in September 2015 and there is currently one further deputy headteacher post to be recruited to in January 2016 or sooner.

St Joseph's College, the current support school, has been chosen to be sponsor of Birches Head Academy. This has been agreed with the Department for Education and leaders are planning for this sponsorship to begin on 1 September 2015. The consultant headteacher will be the executive headteacher.

Achievement of pupils at the school

There is clear evidence that the achievement of students is now improving. However, against a backdrop of a legacy of underachievement, these improvements are not yet sustained.

Students have better attitudes to learning and more of them are coming ready to learn. Teachers have higher expectations of what students can achieve and, as a result, teaching is having a stronger impact. There is some more consistent marking that is helping students understand how to improve. Leaders are forensically tracking students' progress and this is helping with the quicker identification of underachievement, which is then being tackled.

Many disabled students and those who have special educational needs continue to make slow progress. For example, too few of these students in Years 8, 9, 10 and 11 are making the progress expected of them in mathematics. In the past, support for these students has not been sharply focused on helping them to achieve well and recent improvements have not yet had an impact. Leaders have identified that lower-ability students in some year groups are also making slow progress, particularly in mathematics in Year 9.

There continue to be weaknesses in how well students develop and then use well their literacy skills, including in speaking and listening. Many teachers are trying hard to tackle this but there has been no leader with responsibility for this key area for improvement since January 2015 in order to drive needed improvement. However,

students in Year 7 who struggle with reading are making quick progress as a result of additional support and lessons. English teachers are also establishing more of a culture of reading in the academy and, from this, 47 students' Gothic-inspired stories are being included in a nationally published anthology.

Younger students are generally making the quickest progress. For example, in Years 7 and 8 a large majority of students are now at least 'on track'. A set of additional teaching sessions, 'Operation Maths', has helped to develop the mathematical skills of some underachieving students in Years 7 and 8. Students in Year 11 have also benefited from extra teaching to help them prepare for GCSE examinations and the academy's data suggest that this year group of students have been able to catch up to some extent on previous weak levels of progress. Students spoke highly of the 'Easter School' that was arranged and the extra sessions provided by teachers, for example in history.

Gaps in the achievement of disadvantaged students are beginning to close in all year groups, including for Year 11. For example, the academy's data indicate these pupils in Year 8 are making similar progress to their peers in both English and mathematics.

The quality of teaching

Since the last monitoring inspection, the quality of teaching has continued to improve. Teaching is now beginning to have a more sustained impact on students' achievement. However, this is not yet consistent in all subjects and for all groups of students.

Teachers have had a range of opportunities to improve their work through training and workshops that share good practice from this school but also from high-performing schools. They appreciate these opportunities and inspectors observed the impact of these, such as in teachers asking probing questions during lessons that interest and engage students. Both of these aspects of teaching have improved since my previous monitoring inspection.

The best learning we observed during the inspection, and which is having the most impact on students' progress, has common features. In a number of lessons, teachers had established clear routines, high expectations and positive relationships with students. Teachers used their good subject knowledge to enthuse and interest students, for example, by using real-life examples in mathematics and drama lessons that helped students to understand concepts and techniques. In other lessons, teachers used a range of questioning and assessment techniques, such as quick-fire recall and evaluation of character in *Romeo and Juliet*, which helped teachers understand what students needed next. There was also some good marking that helped students know what to do to improve.

Conversely, there continues to be teaching that is having slower and, in some cases, limited impact on the quality of students' learning. For example, some teachers are planning activities that limit the expectations of how much lower-ability students can or should do and not providing enough challenge for the most able students. Leaders need to help these teachers understand how they can plan activities that, for example, support lower ability students to access more difficult concepts rather than just expecting them to complete less difficult work. Teachers sometimes use strategies that do not work well. For example, asking students to assess their own or others' work without giving students the time and knowledge to be able to do this in a meaningful way. Leaders have identified that teachers do not always utilise the expertise and skills of teaching assistants to help students learn well enough, including those who are disabled or have special educational needs.

During this inspection, we observed some examples of where teachers gave students planned opportunities to use their literacy and numeracy skills in lessons other than in English and mathematics. However, there continue to be numerous missed opportunities in teachers' planning for students to use these skills well. Sometimes, students are given texts to read that are not accessible to them because of their current reading skills. On other occasions, students, including the most able, are asked to produce extended written responses without being supported to do so.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The behaviour of students is improving. However, it is not yet consistently good. We still observed examples of low-level disruption, such as talking over the teacher and other students, some silly behaviour in lessons and examples of where students were reluctant to take part in learning activities.

We observed students' better attitudes to learning than has been the case in any previous monitoring inspection. The report of the recent local authority review also identified this improvement. Academy records and discussions with students and staff confirm this to be the case. Both students and staff described higher expectations of the behaviour expected in lessons and a more consistent approach of teachers to managing students' behaviour, as being crucial factors to these improvements. Most students we observed came prepared for lessons and were on time. These aspects of readiness for learning have been a focus since my last monitoring inspection and demonstrate the impact of leaders in making improvements.

Conduct around the academy was generally calm, including in the dining hall and outside. Most students and staff agreed that this was normally the case. Movement in corridors is generally well managed by staff, although some students still do not make way for their classmates or adults who are walking in the opposite direction and so some jostling and congestion continue. At times, groups of students are too noisy in the building. Students move in an orderly fashion on the stairs.

Students we spoke with said they felt safe in the academy and attributed this to the positive relationships with staff. Leaders take quick action when they have concerns about the welfare of students. When asked, many students agreed that it was 'ok' to be different in this academy but said that there was still some name calling; those we spoke to felt that leaders, teachers and support staff dealt well with this when it happened. Academy records indicate that leaders take seriously reported incidents of bullying.

Rates of exclusion from the academy continue to be too high. While this still relates to leaders establishing consistently high expectations, leaders accept that different strategies need to be embedded to manage poor behaviour. Boys and disadvantaged students are more frequently excluded than other groups of students. Students' attendance is gradually increasing and the numbers who are persistently absent are reducing. However, there is still much to do with this.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Leaders, including governors, are making a number of improvements, some quite substantial, which are now improving students' achievement and behaviour, and the quality of teaching. These improvements have not yet had time to be sustained over a period of time.

The academy has no special educational needs coordinator and this means that there is not enough of a coherent approach to supporting the academic achievement of those students who have such needs. There is a lack of pace in ensuring that there is a consistent and effective approach to developing students' literacy skills. Both of these weaknesses in leadership and the impact these have on students' achievement are considerable barriers to the academy's further progress.

The drive and ambition for improvement I referred to in my last letter is being maintained. However, it is crucial that leaders reflect carefully on the criteria against which all academies are judged to make sure that they maintain a realistic view of the academy's overall effectiveness. Failure to do so will result in inaccurate self-evaluation.

The new headteacher has made clear her expectations and staff support her and the consultant headteacher. Leaders continue to raise aspirations and expectations and one way this can be seen is in students being more ready to learn when they arrive at the academy and at lessons. Students have more opportunities to extend their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Some are taking part in the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, others are taking part in public speaking competitions and Year 9 students are having the opportunity to visit a national business to consider career opportunities among other aspects.

Leaders' analysis of students' achievement is forensic and used very well to identify which aspects need to improve as well as celebrating where improvements are being made. Leaders also have a similarly effective understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the quality of teaching. Teachers who need additional support are being given this and where improvements are not being made, leaders are quick to use a range of strategies to tackle this. Leaders are building capacity within the academy by investing in teachers' expertise to coach others so that there can be more 'home grown' good practice that can be shared.

The impact of subject leaders' work is also improving and can be seen in the quality of teaching as well as in aspects of students' achievement. Senior leaders are now working with a wider range of subject leaders to build this impact and increase consistency.

Governors continue to know the work of the academy well and are building up their own checks of how well teaching, behaviour and leadership are improving. There is a tangible difference since my first monitoring inspection in how well governors challenge leaders and ask searching and relevant questions.

Leaders have spent a considerable amount of the additional funding for disadvantaged students on staffing costs. This is making a difference for these students who are also underachieving. However, there is limited evidence and no evaluation to show that most able disadvantaged students are making quicker progress as a result of the decisions leaders have made to spend this funding.

External support

The local authority continues to support and challenge academy leaders well. The reports of the reviews of the academy's progress have been helpful and challenging. The local authority had agreed to provide additional funding to the academy; part of this has been made available and officers will confirm with the headteacher when the remainder of this will be allocated. Leaders and teachers are very positive about the support provided by St Joseph's College and there has been good impact, for example, in supporting moderation of students' work and mentoring of teachers new to the profession.