

Birchwood Community High School

Brock Road, Birchwood, Warrington, Cheshire WA3 7PT

Inspection dates

4–5 May 2016

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Requires improvement

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

16 to 19 study programmes

Good

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Not previously inspected

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Pupils who left school in 2015 did not make good enough progress across a range of subjects. This was particularly the case for those pupils who have special educational needs or disability.
- The gap between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and their peers is not closing quickly enough.
- There is too much variability in the quality of teaching both within and between subjects. Not enough teachers challenge their pupils to make the best possible progress.
- Leaders do not have high enough expectations for pupils who enter the school with low prior attainment and for some with average prior attainment.
- Too many disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs or disability do not attend school regularly. These pupils also receive too many fixed-term exclusions.
- Leaders and governors do not monitor and evaluate the impact of their actions effectively enough.

The school has the following strengths

- Students attending the school's sixth form, Birchwood College, benefit from high-quality provision that is both inclusive and aspirational. Students achieve well which enables them to progress successfully to higher education, apprenticeships or employment.
- The headteacher has a clear vision for the school. Staff feel valued and speak positively of the change of culture since she took up her post in September.
- The actions of the new senior leadership team this year have brought about some improvements in pupils' behaviour, the quality of teaching and pupils' progress.
- Positive relationships exist between staff and pupils. Pupils generally behave well around the school.
- Pupils benefit from high-quality teaching in performing arts and ethics, philosophy and religion.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve outcomes for pupils further, by:
 - ensuring that in all subjects pupils make at least good progress relative to their starting points
 - building on recent improvements to make certain that gaps in achievement between disadvantaged pupils and their peers are closed quickly
 - ensuring that pupils who have special educational needs or disability are enabled to make the best possible progress.

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning across the school by making sure that all teachers:
 - have the highest expectations of what their pupils can achieve
 - provide the right level of challenge and support for all pupils
 - use questioning effectively to check and develop pupils' understanding
 - challenge any low-level disruption that occurs.

- Reduce further the number of disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs or disability who are persistently absent and/or receive fixed-term exclusions.

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by ensuring that all leaders and governors systematically monitor and evaluate the impact of their actions.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium funding should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management requires improvement

- Since taking up her post in September 2015, the headteacher and her new senior leadership team have acted to bring about improvements in the behaviour of pupils, the quality of teaching, and pupils' outcomes. While these actions have had some success, the school has not travelled far enough on its journey of improvement. Leaders, including governors, have not systematically monitored and evaluated the impact of their actions effectively enough. Their evaluation of the school's performance is overgenerous.
- Senior leaders have not acted swiftly enough to tackle some areas which they identified as requiring improvement at the start of the year. For example, they recognised that the way teachers were marking pupils' work was not necessarily helping them to make progress. However, new procedures for written feedback were only introduced at the start of the summer term.
- Leaders do not have high enough expectations for those pupils who enter the school with low prior attainment, and for some with average prior attainment. For these pupils, their aspirational target is simply to make expected progress. In comparison, those with high prior attainment are set targets that represent better than expected progress. Inspection evidence indicates that this means that some teachers do not always have the highest expectations of what their pupils can achieve.
- Assessment information shows that disadvantaged pupils are making better progress than last year. However, although gaps with their peers are closing, this is not happening quickly enough. Until very recently, leaders have not effectively evaluated whether the way they have deployed the pupil premium funding is having enough impact on the outcomes for these pupils. They have also not targeted the funding sufficiently at those pupils for whom it is intended.
- The new leadership team has carried out a full curriculum review to ensure that it is appropriate and engaging for all pupils. As a result, there are some planned changes from September 2016, such as the introduction of two languages into the Year 7 curriculum. There will also be a wider range of vocational courses on offer in key stage 4 with clear progression routes to high-quality level 3 courses in the sixth form.
- Pupils' social, moral, cultural and spiritual development is an important element of the personal development curriculum (PDC). Pupils spoken to during the inspection have negative views about PDC. They are critical of the content of the lessons, which they feel are not helping them to prepare effectively for life in modern Britain. Senior leaders agree that the content and delivery of the PDC curriculum require improvement, and there are plans to change both from September 2016. There are opportunities for social, moral, cultural and spiritual development in ethics, philosophy and religion, and history lessons, but senior leaders have not audited where else this is happening.
- Pupils have the opportunity to be involved in a wide range of extra-curricular activities in areas such as sport, media and performing arts. Pupils are invited to attend breakfast clubs in the science and English departments. This year, senior leaders have focused on encouraging disadvantaged pupils to become involved in enrichment activities. Pupils are encouraged to take part in a range of community projects, including raising money for national and local charities. Pupils are actively involved in a range of leadership roles across the school, including governors' meetings.
- The headteacher introduced new systems for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning from September 2015. Subject leaders are now fully involved in the quality assurance process and have benefited from training to help them carry out this role effectively. When teaching does not reach the level expected, additional support and challenge are added to improve practice. Senior leaders' judgements about the quality of teaching are no longer based simply on observations, but include work scrutiny, pupils' views and progress information.
- Procedures for managing teachers' performance are robust. Teachers' targets are linked closely to the school's priorities and pupils' outcomes. The headteacher and governors have been prepared to take decisive action when teachers do not meet the required standards. Equally, they have used the system effectively to reward teachers for very strong performance.
- Staff are very positive about the way the school is led. Those who spoke to inspectors feel that the new headteacher has improved staff morale and engendered a positive culture. They feel that leaders involve them in the changes that are being made, and consequently they feel valued.
- Responses to the online parent survey are extremely positive, with the vast majority saying that their children feel happy and safe and are progressing well. Parents are appreciative of the support and extra-curricular activities provided by the school. There are, however, some concerns expressed about pupils' progress being hindered by poor behaviour leading to disruption of learning.

- The headteacher values the support and challenge that the school receives from a senior local authority adviser, particularly in relation to developing the capacity of leaders and governors.
- **The governance of the school**
 - Governors describe themselves as being in a time of transition. A new chair of the governing body was elected in July 2015 and she has set about changing the structure and operating procedures of the governing body. She has a clear vision for how the governing body can become more effective, and proactive rather than reactive.
 - Governors are aware that throughout the year they have not always ensured that they have had the right information to be able to challenge leaders effectively, particularly about outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. Consequently, they have not provided sufficient challenge to senior leaders to ensure that their actions are having an impact and improving outcomes for pupils with the urgency required. There is, though, evidence that, over recent months, governors are asking more searching questions of senior leaders and they are holding them to account more robustly.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. The work that the school does to keep its pupils safe is of a high standard. The experienced designated safeguarding lead is supported in her work by a specialist team. Staff engage effectively and appropriately with parents, carers and other stakeholders to make sure that all pupils are supported and safe. Procedures to ensure that all staff receive relevant training are robust, as are the protocols and practices for record-keeping. Staff have received a range of training on potential areas of risk for young people, including radicalisation, female genital mutilation and child sexual exploitation. Inspectors noted a few areas where site security could be improved, which they pointed out to the headteacher. Following this discussion, inspectors were impressed by the swift response of senior leaders to this matter. By the end of the inspection, plans had been drawn up to address these concerns as a matter of urgency.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment requires improvement

- While leaders' actions have brought about some improvements in the quality of teaching, there remains too much variability both within and between subjects. Many pupils are benefiting from good and better teaching but this is not consistent across the school. Some pupils, particularly low and middle-attaining ones, are not getting enough access to high-quality teaching in their lessons which prevents them from making the best possible progress.
- Not all teachers have high enough expectations of what their pupils can achieve. This lack of challenge is preventing some of these pupils from making good progress. Too often, teaching, particularly the use of questioning, limits rather than deepens and extends pupils' thinking and understanding.
- Teachers do not always challenge low-level disruption. At times, teachers are too slow to use the school's sanctions system, and consequently behaviour deteriorates as the lesson progresses. Inspectors observed that this disruption to learning takes place mainly in low and middle-ability sets. Pupils spoken to during the inspection say that there is inconsistency in the way that teachers apply the behaviour policy.
- Prior to the introduction of the new marking policy, much of teachers' written feedback was not helping pupils to improve their work. There is evidence that the new system introduced at the start of the summer term is helping pupils to make progress but the concern is that this has only been implemented late in the year. Despite the existence of a literacy marking policy, there is some inconsistency in how teachers are correcting spelling, punctuation and grammar errors.
- There is variability in the impact that teaching assistants have on the progress of the pupils they support. Inspectors observed teaching assistants making a positive difference to learning in design technology and computing. However, weaker practice was observed in mathematics.
- Inspection evidence indicates that where the school sets aspirational targets, for high-attaining pupils and students in the sixth form, most teachers challenge them to reach these. For example, in a Year 13 drama lesson, an inspector observed how the teacher has the highest expectations of what all the students can achieve. This level of challenge is a significant factor in all the group being on target to achieve distinction grades in this subject. This high level of challenge was also observed in the teaching of ethics, philosophy and religion.
- Pupils value the positive relationships that they have with many of their teachers, which make a contribution to the quality of learning. Where teaching is effective, teachers use their expertise and passion for the subject, coupled with their knowledge of their pupils, to enthuse and involve them in their learning. They use questioning skilfully to check and extend pupils' understanding, assess their pupils' progress effectively

and use this information to plan the next stage of their learning.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare requires improvement

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare requires improvement. Key stage 3 pupils interviewed during the inspection think that bullying is rare in school, and any incidents are dealt with very effectively. In contrast, some of the key stage 4 pupils who were interviewed say that when bullying does occur it is not taken seriously enough by some staff.
- A high priority for senior leaders is the promotion and celebration of diversity. They believe that the school is a safe and accepting place to be open about one's sexuality. Key stage 3 pupils spoken to during the inspection agree with this. However, while the key stage 4 pupils interviewed recognise the work senior leaders do to promote diversity, they are not as confident that the school is an accepting place to be open about one's sexuality.
- A small number of pupils attend the Warrington pupil referral unit. There are strong communication channels between leaders in school and those at this provider, including regular visits. Clear and effective systems for sharing information about the welfare of these pupils exist.
- Pupils and students benefit from effective careers education, information, advice and guidance in Years 9 to 13. Leaders are planning to extend this into Year 7 and 8 from September 2016.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils requires improvement. Senior leaders believe that the actions they have taken since September have led to an improvement in behaviour, and many staff agree with this. While acknowledging this improvement, observations of learning and some pupils' views indicate that low-level disruption in some lessons remains a concern.
- There has been a reduction in the number of pupils receiving fixed-term exclusions this year, but this smaller cohort of pupils have been excluded for more days. Of further concern is that disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs or disability make up a high proportion of this cohort. Reducing the number of these pupils who are excluded is a high priority for senior leaders.
- Pupils are generally polite, friendly and behave well around the school. During break and lunchtime, and when moving between lessons, the majority of pupils behave in a mature and calm manner.
- The vast majority of pupils attend school regularly and are cared for well by the staff. However, too many disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs have poor attendance and, consequently, are missing out on this high-quality care. Leaders are focusing their actions on reducing the number of these pupils who are regularly absent, and current attendance figures represent an improvement on the previous year. Leaders recognise that there is still further work to be done to close attendance gaps between these pupils and their peers.

Outcomes for pupils require improvement

- Pupils who left school in 2015 did not make good enough progress across a range of subjects. Published data shows that in 2015 the overall value added score was significantly below the national average and pupils did not make enough progress in mathematics, science and humanities. Pupils who have special educational needs or disability did not make good progress in 2015. There was also a decline in the performance of Year 11 pupils in 2015 compared to the previous year.
- The school's data for pupils currently on roll shows that all attainment and progress figures are set to improve in 2016. Senior leaders are confident that their predictions for outcomes at the end of this year are accurate because formal assessments are used more frequently and the checking of teachers' assessments take place both internally and with other schools. However, scrutiny of pupils' work and observations of their learning indicate that some are still not making consistently good progress.
- Attainment and progress gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their peers are not closing quickly enough, particularly in mathematics. Until very recently, leaders have not been effective enough in evaluating the impact of their actions in this area. Recent interventions with Year 11 disadvantaged pupils in mathematics have had some impact resulting in improved predictions for their attainment and progress. Actions taken throughout the year in English have had more success and disadvantaged pupils in Year 11 are predicted to

make progress at a similar rate to their peers in this subject.

- From September 2015, the headteacher has ensured that pupils who have special educational needs or disability are a high priority for all staff in school. The specialist team has been expanded and a new suite of facilities has been created which provides a very nurturing learning environment. The well-qualified special educational needs coordinator ensures that her team of teaching assistants are well trained in order to have the most impact on the pupils with whom they work. These changes are helping Year 7 pupils with special educational needs or disability to make good progress and Year 11 pupils are predicted to make better progress in 2016 compared to the previous year. Improved progress was not as evident in other year groups.
- A much higher priority is now given to helping those pupils who are supported by the Year 7 literacy and numeracy catch-up premium. As a result, the majority of these pupils are making accelerated progress.
- Leaders receive information about the general progress of the small number of pupils who attend the pupil referral unit. However, there is not a sharp enough focus on monitoring their academic progress.
- In 2015, not enough pupils attained the highest possible GCSE grades at the end of Year 11. A higher proportion are predicted to attain A and A* grades in 2016. Although inspectors saw evidence of some teachers really challenging pupils to achieve these high grades, this is not consistent throughout the school.

16 to 19 study programmes

are good

- Birchwood College, the school's sixth form, provides an inclusive and aspirational education for its students. The sixth form opened in 2010 and the curriculum has been developed to meet the needs of the students. The sixth form is well led.
- During their time in the sixth form, students are provided with a range of opportunities that enable them to develop into mature and accomplished young men and women. Students value the education and support they receive. They speak very positively about their experiences in the sixth form.
- Students benefit from high-quality teaching. They make progress on vocational advanced level courses that is significantly above the national average. The progress they make on academic advanced level courses is broadly in line with the national average. Students on advanced level courses achieve well which enables them to progress successfully to higher education, apprenticeships or employment. Students also achieve well on level 2 courses and progress to advanced level study, training or employment.
- All students who have not attained a grade C in English or mathematics receive appropriate teaching and support. The success rates when students retake these examinations are better in English than mathematics.
- Students benefit from a comprehensive programme of careers education, information, advice and guidance which enables them to progress to higher education, training or full-time employment after leaving the sixth form. Many students take up university places: 76% of the cohort did so in 2015, and 85% are due to do so in 2016. It is particularly impressive that eight students have received unconditional offers for 2016 on the strength of their applications and performances at interview.
- The weekly guidance programme covers a range of topics including sexual health, e-safety and the 'Prevent' duty. Vulnerable students are supported very effectively, which helps them to make good progress and achieve successful outcomes.
- Pupils benefit from a wide range of work experience opportunities. All Year 12 students take part in a week of work experience. Staff work hard to find appropriate placements that will help students with their career aspirations. For example, two students studying law were given the opportunity to shadow a high-profile lawyer during the Hillsborough enquiry. This significant experience contributed to their success in securing unconditional offers for their university courses.
- All students are involved in the weekly enrichment programme. They have the opportunity to attend a wide range of courses and activities, several of which are formally accredited. Students are also encouraged to take the extended project qualification (EPQ) if it is thought that they would benefit from this extra academic challenge.

School details

Unique reference number	139840
Local authority	Warrington
Inspection number	10005567

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Secondary comprehensive
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,059
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	156
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Andrea Atherton
Headteacher	Moira Bryan
Telephone number	01925 853500
Website	www.birchwoodhigh.org
Email address	contactus@birchwoodhigh.org
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- Birchwood Community High School is a larger than average secondary school. It converted to academy status in July 2013.
- The proportion of pupils who are disadvantaged and, therefore, supported with additional government funding, known as the pupil premium, is slightly below the national average. The pupil premium is funding for those pupils who are known to be eligible for free school meals, and for looked after children.
- The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups and those who speak English as an additional language is well below the national average.
- The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs is higher than the national average.
- A small number of pupils access alternative education at New Horizons, the Warrington pupil referral unit.
- A new headteacher and two new deputy headteachers were appointed in September 2015. A new chair of the governing body was also elected in July 2015.
- The academy meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.
- The school meets the requirements on the publication of specific information on its website.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed teaching and learning in lessons across a range of subjects, including joint observations with senior leaders. They carried out a work scrutiny with senior leaders.
- Inspectors met with three groups of pupils and talked to others informally during breaks and lunchtimes. Discussions were held with staff, including senior and middle leaders, classroom teachers and newly qualified teachers. A meeting was held with the chair, and five other members of the governing body. A further meeting was held with the chair of the governing body on the second day of the inspection.
- Inspectors took account of the 105 responses to the online Ofsted Parent View survey, and the 13 online questionnaires completed by staff. Problems with the technology prevented more staff and any pupils responding to the online questionnaires.
- Inspectors scrutinised a range of documents. These included the school's self-evaluation and development plan, performance information, and a selection of policies.

Inspection team

Anne Seneviratne, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Jonathan Jones	Her Majesty's Inspector
Marcia Harding	Ofsted Inspector
Victoria Atherton	Ofsted Inspector
Liz Kelly	Ofsted Inspector
Janet Peckett	Ofsted Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 4234
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

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