

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



14 November 2016

Mr Rob O'Hara
Headteacher
The Birches School
Newholme Road
West Didsbury
Manchester
M20 2XZ

Dear Mr O'Hara

Short inspection of The Birches School

Following my visit to the school on 1 November 2016 with Doreen Davenport, Ofsted Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be outstanding in July 2012.

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection. As a new headteacher you have ensured that the school moves seamlessly forward, driving improvements and sharpening staff understanding of outstanding teaching and learning. Consequently, pupils have continued to make strong progress across the school. The recent restructuring of governance and the expansion of your leadership team have enabled distinct lines of responsibility to be implemented. Your senior leaders have a clear focus on ensuring that teaching, learning and assessment blossom across the school.

The school is highly skilled in teaching autistic pupils and gained the international quality standard, Autism Accreditation, in 2014. Consequently, the area for improvement identified at the last inspection has been tackled effectively.

Partnerships with other outstanding special schools are used well to obtain validation of the quality of the school's work. This approach has ensured that assessments are accurate and has encouraged staff to be outward-looking in school development.

The tracking and monitoring of attendance has been tightened by leaders and expectations raised across the school community. Effective systems are now ensuring that, whenever possible and within the limitations of medical circumstances, pupils' attendance is beginning to improve further across the school. Staff provide a supportive and caring environment where everyone is encouraged to

strive and achieve their potential. The school has a unique family feel where everyone is highly valued and strong relationships are formed between staff and pupils. Equality permeates all aspects of the school's work. Staff use a range of effective communication strategies to ensure that their interaction with pupils is successful in bringing about effective learning and supporting pupils' development in the classroom. During break and lunchtime, staff enjoy spending time with pupils. They seize every opportunity to ensure that the school's vast and exemplary resources are used well to further develop pupils' skills and communication. Pupils have a strong sense of belonging to the school and enjoy spending time in their lessons learning and developing new skills.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership of safeguarding in the school is strong. Safeguarding arrangements and procedures operate properly and promptly. The school's safeguarding policy is clear and informative, reflecting current guidance and requirements. Leaders ensure that keeping pupils safe is a fundamental part of everyday life in the school. They ensure that staff are well trained and well versed in their responsibility to ensure the welfare and safety of all pupils. Staff are vigilant and recognise that pupils are extremely vulnerable and experience a wide range of difficulties which can impact on their ability to disclose worries, difficulties or abuse. The safeguarding team is highly effective and this is checked upon by the governors' own safeguarding scrutiny committee. Leaders work hard to support parents and carers with the dangers of e-safety and the internet. For example, they provided support to parents on how to keep personal internet devices used in the home safe for pupils.

Pupils are well informed about how to keep themselves safe and leaders have ensured that appropriate information is delivered through the curriculum. All staff have a detailed understanding of the needs of every pupil because systems for sharing information across the school are robust. New pupil personal development plans are well understood by staff. As a result, there are very few serious behaviour incidents. When incidents do occur, they are dealt with appropriately and carefully logged and evaluated as part of a wider assessment of needs and associated risks.

Inspection findings

- A spirit of inclusion and equality pervades the school, characterised by harmony and respect. Leaders capitalise on very positive working relationships with staff, parents and all linked professionals. They have developed a school that is vibrant and diverse, holding pupils' development at the absolute heart of all that the school strives to achieve.
- Leaders have highly detailed knowledge about pupils in the school and their individual needs and circumstances. This enables them to pinpoint exactly what each pupil needs in order to make the best possible progress. Frequent checks on teaching and learning reveal that pupils make strong progress.
- Pupils' academic abilities, including their reading and mathematical skills, are assessed on entry to the school and measured again at set points to check that improvements have been made. Pupils make excellent progress from their

starting points. Information you provided about pupils currently in the school shows that the positive trend of improvement is on track to continue. The impact of all teaching and therapeutic interventions is methodically measured to ensure that they are making a difference.

- A refocus on the quality of teaching and learning has been at the heart of the school's work since the last inspection. Senior leaders drive a mantra of excellence across the school. In addition, all staff benefit from regular scheduled professional development opportunities. They have a clear understanding of the recent government changes related to working with pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. As a result, information collected by leaders shows that the quality of teaching and learning continues to improve.
- Teachers work seamlessly with teaching assistants in lessons because learning plans are shared and well thought out to ensure that pupils make small but significant steps in progress. Teachers and support staff know their pupils well and work together to anticipate their needs so that barriers to learning are removed. Praise is used frequently across the school to reward pupils' efforts and boost confidence and self-esteem.
- Staff skilfully use a variety of communication strategies, depending on the skills and preferences of individual pupils. They reduce the amount of verbal information they use to make their instructions clear. They supplement speech with visual supports and signing to promote pupils' understanding. As a result, pupils make strong progress in the development of their communication skills.
- Pupils benefit immensely from the broad range of therapy provided by the school. As a result, pupils' academic, personal and physical development is supported to flourish because they are given the skills to overcome their very specific difficulties. I observed excited pupils engaging in a sensory yoga lesson, with staff tailoring motor challenges, strength and coordination to match pupils' needs and requirements. As a result, all pupils made progress, squealed with delight and left the session calm and ready for their next challenge.
- Pupils' behaviour in and around school is undeniably excellent. Their attitudes to learning are of the highest level and do not wane as the day progresses. This is because staff use the school's exemplary resources effectively and ensure that lessons are creative, imaginative and above all engaging to accommodate all their different needs, abilities and aspirations. Pupils who are known to have difficulty concentrating for long periods of time are brought back on track swiftly by staff so that learning hardly ever falters. Pupils' excellent behaviour contributes significantly to their progress.
- Staff are committed to empowering pupils and ensure that the work of the school shows that their thoughts, feelings and preferences matter. The school council is well established and helps pupils to have a greater say over matters that affect their school and wider lives. They take a lead role in interviewing prospective staff and contribute to deciding on staff appointments in the school. Through their own democratic appointments they have a good knowledge of British values. They play an active role in making their school a better place and develop their own life skills through this participation.
- Since the recent review of governance, a revitalised and sharpened governing body has emerged with vigour and commitment to improve the quality of education within the school even further. Governors are well informed about

pupils' achievements and the quality of teaching and learning. They use their plethora of skills to challenge and support the school well. They have a good understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development. Governing body committees have been reorganised to provide a platform to question impact and hold leaders to account.

- Leaders value the contribution that parents and carers make to pupils' developments in school. They recognise that empowering parents and signposting vital organisations that provide support to families of those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities contribute to raising pupils' outcomes. Leaders have invested in a parental support adviser so that the needs of the whole family are nurtured. Monthly workshops and weekly drop-in clinics are accessible to parents and carers. A recent sibling day allowed time for families to build relationships while enjoying a variety of activities such as baking, crafts and sports. Staff have shared with parents successful approaches used to support pupils when they are in school so that they can employ these within the home setting. Information provided to inspectors by leaders showed that parents appreciated the additional support and events on offer.
- Stakeholders recognise the positive impact that the school has on the lives of its pupils and consider the school to be very well led. Most of the parents who completed Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, agreed that their child is very well looked after. Parents speak warmly about the school and the efforts of staff to ensure that their children thrive and achieve. Many parents commented favourably regarding the school's work on Parent View: 'As a parent of a special needs child, I can only commend the school for providing an environment that gives him every opportunity to develop and thrive.'
- The school meets requirements on the publication of specified information on its website.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they extend their current strong analysis of pupils' academic progress information to include measures of improvement in pupils' personal development, so that they can evaluate even more precisely the impact of their actions on pupils' outcomes
- teachers plan learning to include even higher levels of challenge so that pupils' outcomes excel even further.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body and the director of children's services for Manchester. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Dawn Platt
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors undertook 'learning walks' and observed teaching and learning across a range of classes of pupils who have varying special educational needs and/or disabilities. Meetings took place with you, your senior leaders, members of the governing body, members of staff and the school council. Inspectors scrutinised a range of supporting documentation about safeguarding and child protection, the school's self-evaluation, monitoring information and improvement plans, minutes of governors' meetings, records relating to attendance, and information relating to pupils' achievement.

Inspectors took into account 14 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, as well as eight responses from parents on Ofsted's free text service. Nine responses to the online staff questionnaire were also considered.

This inspection particularly focused on a number of key questions:

- Are leaders using effective strategies to improve pupils' attendance and reduce persistent absence in the school?
- Are teaching and learning supporting excellent outcomes for all pupils?
- Are pupils safe and are staff up to date with current legislation for safeguarding pupils?
- Are staff aware of the special educational needs and disability code of practice and are they trained appropriately to effectively support pupils?
- Do governors hold the school to account effectively and carry out their statutory responsibilities?