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6 April 2017

Mrs Moira Bryan
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Bryan

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Birchwood Community High School

Following my visit on 30 March 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in May 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- ensure that teachers challenge pupils to explain their thinking
- raise pupils' aspirations by ensuring that they understand the characteristics of high-quality work
- improve the presentation and accuracy of pupils' writing.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you and your senior leadership team, a representative of the local authority, the chair of the governing body and the vice-chair of the governors' finance committee to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I made brief visits to several lessons, sometimes accompanied by the

leader who is developing learning and teaching across the school. I spoke with some pupils about their work and looked at their exercise books. I also spoke with pupils informally at breaktime and met with the head boy and girl. I considered the school improvement plan and self-evaluation document. I also looked at the records of monitoring activities undertaken by the local authority, whose support you commission. I considered information about the progress, attendance and behaviour of pupils currently attending the school. I also reviewed the school's arrangements for keeping pupils safe, including the checks made on staff appointed since the last inspection. I took into account the responses made by parents to the school's survey of their satisfaction. I read the reports that followed the reviews of governance and the school's use of pupil premium funding. I considered the action plans that were put into place following these reviews.

Context

There have been several changes to staffing since the last inspection.

Several staff who were already working at the school have taken up new roles as: senior leader of teaching and learning; head of learning for life; acting head of mathematics; head of physical education and Year 11 team leader. New subject leaders for English and geography and a data manager have been recruited, who previously worked in other schools. There has been a restructure of support staffing. Consultation has recently closed on a restructure of teaching staff. Pupil numbers have remained stable. The school is about to admit 14 pupils to Year 10 in response to the closure of a local studio school.

Main findings

You took the findings of the last inspection very seriously and developed a clear, comprehensive action plan that includes a full response to all the areas for improvement identified by inspectors. The plan is kept under review by the senior leadership team and governing body. There is a systematic process through which all staff are kept informed of the school's progress in tackling priorities. You have reviewed and improved the school's communication systems to good effect. Key messages are communicated regularly to staff. Scheduled briefings focused on teaching and learning give staff opportunities to consider how best to remove barriers to learning. This applies especially to pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and those who are eligible for pupil premium funding.

Pupils' views have influenced your thinking about school improvement. They prompted the redesign of the personal, social and health education curriculum into the 'learning for life' programme, through which they explore relevant topics including financial management, sexual exploitation and online safety. The 'learner officers' are working with you to consider how the school's lunchtime arrangements might be improved.

The school's work to improve the quality of teaching has moved on at pace. Non-negotiable expectations of how lessons should be planned and taught have been agreed with staff. Pupils told me that they now feel clearer about what they are learning; they said that they liked having a 'pattern' to their lessons. Leaders' monitoring of learning and teaching indicates that more-effective practice is now found in a range of subjects. In English, revised schemes of work have given teachers a route map to ensure that examination syllabuses are covered. I observed pupils working hard to decide whether Macbeth was responsible for his own actions or whether the witches were more blameworthy because they lured him with prophecies. Pupils responded to the teachers' skilful questioning and were able to justify their opinions using quotations from the play. There is a way to go to ensure that insightful questioning becomes the norm, as sometimes there is a reliance on 'closed' questions. This means that pupils do not get into the habit of explaining their thinking in depth.

Provision for pupils who join Birchwood with below-average attainment in English and mathematics has been enhanced. Specialist literacy and numeracy teachers are helping these pupils to make quick gains in their learning. Year 7 pupils explored excitedly the ways in which characters were portrayed in Roald Dahl's 'Jack and the beanstalk'. They drew conclusions about the image of parenting that his narratives present.

The use of a defined approach to lesson planning is not inhibiting teachers' creativity. In science, pupils shared with each other their ideas about how hormones control fertility; they learned actively through discussion. Pupils have produced artwork in history to demonstrate their understanding of slavery. There is a 'buzz' of energy in some classes, reflecting pupils' positive attitudes to their learning.

Teachers share learning objectives with pupils, in line with the school's policy. We agreed that more could be done to raise pupils' aspirations by making clear to them what good examples of work look like. Your monitoring indicates that this happens increasingly in English, where teachers share examples of pupils' 'writing in progress' to show how language can be used effectively. In geography, examples of pupils' work are displayed prominently and provide pupils with images of success.

Teachers encourage pupils to use correct terminology. Throughout the school, key vocabulary appropriate to different subjects is displayed clearly. In Spanish, Year 7 pupils readily used vocabulary charts to translate Spanish text accurately into English. In religious education, the teacher encouraged pupils to pronounce Sikh terms correctly. Although pupils recognise the need to use language accurately, their written notes are not of a consistently good quality in terms of presentation or in the spelling of key terms. This makes their books less dependable for revision in preparation for examinations.

The school's approach to behaviour management has been revisited. Pupils explained to me that the 'Right to teach: Right to learn' approach has led to calmer behaviour and more mature attitudes to learning among most, but not all, pupils.

Generally, pupils are eager to earn praise from their teachers for work well done and for positive behaviour. Records show that after an initial increase in the use of sanctions following the introduction of a 'zero tolerance' approach, poor behaviour is now less common. The number of pupils temporarily excluded from school has reduced and attendance has improved slightly. A significant proportion of pupils that are excluded are disadvantaged. Leaders and staff continue to work hard with individual pupils and their families to find the most effective ways of improving behaviour.

The school was asked to have external reviews of governance and of the use of pupil premium funding following the inspection. Both of these reviews were completed promptly. Precise action plans were drawn up following both reviews. These documents reflect the determination of leaders and governors to overcome any barriers to success. The school's GCSE examination results in 2016 indicated that the differences in achievement between disadvantaged pupils and others nationally remained quite wide. Targeted use of the pupil premium and the greater involvement of teachers in understanding the issues faced by pupils are paying dividends. Teachers give priority to disadvantaged pupils in subtle ways as they implement the school's 'go to first' policy. The school's information about the progress of current pupils indicates that differences are beginning to diminish, particularly at key stage 3.

Governors are knowledgeable and tenacious. The standards committee analyses the school's performance rigorously. It is well informed by your detailed reports and also by the input from senior and middle leaders and from pupil 'learner officers'. Governors have undertaken valuable training and have kept their committee structure under review to ensure that their efficiency is maximised.

Ofsted may carry out further monitoring inspections and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

Although the school is a converter academy, it has maintained strong links with the local authority. A school improvement adviser has monitored the school's work through lesson observations, work scrutiny and reviewing performance data. She has brokered support from other schools through the 'Warrington challenge' programme. The support these schools have provided for subject leaders has had a positive impact, particularly in considering the requirements of GCSE syllabuses and how these affect curriculum planning and assessment.

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

Yours sincerely

Shirley Gornall
Her Majesty's Inspector