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Mr Tim Jones  
Headteacher  
Birchensale Middle School  
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Worcestershire  
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Dear Mr Jones

### **Short inspection of Birchensale Middle School**

Following my visit to the school on 9 October 2018 with Alan Johnson, 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 good in December 2013.

#### **This school continues to be good.**

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

Since the last inspection standards at the school have improved after an initial decline in outcomes in 2016. Current pupils at key stage 2 make strong progress and the progress of pupils in key stage 3 is good across a range of subjects, including in English and mathematics. You have addressed effectively the areas for improvement from the previous inspection report. You and your leaders have effective improvement plans in place and as a result, outcomes for pupils have improved. Furthermore, pupils' handwriting has improved, and they take pride in their work. You agree that the school's strategic assessment analysis needs further work to be fully effective in informing you and governors about how well groups of pupils are achieving.

You and your senior leaders know the school's strengths and weaknesses very well and your self-evaluation is highly accurate. You and your dedicated staff have created a truly inclusive school in which every pupil is valued and cared for. Pupils benefit from teachers' knowledge of them and their families, allowing staff to be nurturing and supportive when needed. Staff have a passion for the well-being of their pupils and ensure that they are happy and safe. The clear strength of your school is the pastoral care you provide for your pupils. This allows them both to thrive academically and to become well-rounded human beings. The school's 'Bungalow' is a 'safe haven' for the most vulnerable pupils in the school. Here they receive targeted support and have a place of sanctuary if they feel distressed or

upset. Pupils speak very highly of the Bungalow and the support they receive when needed.

The leadership of the school's safeguarding and pastoral care in the Bungalow is exceptional. Leaders involve the families of vulnerable pupils and/or engage with hard to reach families in targeted sessions and courses to support them. For example, during the time of the inspection, inspectors visited a course run in the Bungalow for parents on how best to support their children through puberty. The course was attended well, and parents speak very highly of all the support on offer. Your work with the school's most vulnerable pupils is excellent. In a short time at your school, they overcome some of their barriers to learning and, equally if not more importantly, their social issues. For example, during the time of the inspection a vulnerable pupil brought a sandwich to an inspector who was observing lunchtime in the dining hall, because the pupil thought that the inspector had forgotten her lunch. Just one example of the many overwhelming and positive interactions inspectors had while visiting your school.

Pupils sit benchmarking exams upon entry to your school and then again annually to gauge their progress. This is complemented by regular and appropriate assessments throughout the school year in each subject. Work is moderated and checked within learning areas, allowing middle leaders and teachers to spot when pupils fall behind. However, this vast amount of information is then not collated and presented in a format that informs you and your governors about the performance pupil groups, for example. Senior leaders analyse all information and take too long to have a clear overview of how well pupils, and especially pupil groups, are performing. As a result, leaders are not able to inform governors quickly and effectively of how well pupil groups are achieving. This practice of strategically tracking and analysing information is not yet as effective as it could be.

The school's programme to improve pupils' reading ability is highly effective. The library is used effectively before and after school, and pupils benefit from daily reading lessons. The school's dog 'Dotty' effectively supports the most reluctant or weakest readers to make progress in reading. They read with and to Dotty and take care in their reading and comprehension to ensure that Dotty understands the content of the material read. Pupils enjoy reading and do so during social times, for example in the school's dining hall at lunchtime. As a result, pupils' outcomes in reading are strong.

Governors are passionate about their school. The governing body consists of members who have wide-ranging expertise and fulfil their statutory duties with diligence. However, they are not fully aware of the published information about pupil groups. This is partly due to leaders' analysis of assessment information and because they rely too heavily on leaders to present and analyse information for them. Plans are in place to provide further training for governors.

## **Safeguarding is effective.**

You have ensured that all staff are aware of their responsibility to be vigilant on safeguarding. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. There is a strong safeguarding culture across the school. Staff have regular and focused child protection training paired with regular updates so that they are aware of pertinent issues, including local and new priorities such as child sexual exploitation. Consequently, staff fulfil their safeguarding responsibilities effectively. Staff are clear about who to refer any concerns on to and leaders deal with referrals diligently, drawing upon external agencies when the need arises.

Pupils are and feel safe at school. Those who spoke to inspectors expressed a sound understanding of ways to keep themselves safe, including from online dangers. Pupils are confident that staff would deal effectively with any bullying or other problems they might experience. Pupils are highly complimentary about the pastoral support that they receive when they need it. Pupils say that school is 'a happy and fun place to be'.

## **Inspection findings**

- Teaching is good. Leaders have an accurate view of the quality of teaching. This is because the monitoring of teachers' performance allows them to identify where additional support is needed or complementary training is required. Teachers say that the training they receive helps them to improve their teaching practice. Teaching is underpinned by strong relationships and a caring and conducive learning environment where pupils can thrive and behave impeccably. Teachers know their pupils well and assess regularly how well they are achieving. Work in pupils' books shows that the large majority make strong progress from their different starting points in a range of subjects, including in English and mathematics. At times, planning does not take full account of appropriate stretch and challenge tasks for the most able pupils. Tasks provided are often more of the same activities instead of broadening and deepening pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding. As a result, the more able pupils do not yet make the progress of which they are capable.
- You and your leaders have carefully designed the curriculum. It offers a broad range of subjects and is underpinned by out-of-lesson learning opportunities, be it through extra-curricular clubs, visits or excursions. You have balanced the curriculum well. For example, pupils in key stage 2 do not have a curriculum that is loaded too heavily with English and mathematics but offers a wide range of creative and academic subjects. You and your leaders believe that your school is 'not an exam factory but a happy learning environment with a range of subjects to engage every pupil'. Pupils' well-being is promoted very well through the curriculum, for instance in life skills lessons and through the many friendly and meaningful interactions staff and pupils have throughout the day. Your work to offer extended learning opportunities to more-able pupils is not as well developed. They do not yet benefit from activities that sufficiently broaden and deepen their learning outside of the classroom.

- Pupils enter your school with below-average prior attainment. While at your school the large majority make strong gains and leave at the end of Year 8 having made good progress, especially in reading. Outcomes in mathematics have improved markedly in 2018 and pupils across both key stages achieve well. You have recently strengthened the quality of your middle leadership team. As a result, middle leaders now accurately moderate assessments and ensure that pupils achieve well, apart from the most able pupils. Their achievements are not as good. While teachers know their pupils very well and plan lessons that engage them, teachers do not routinely plan tasks that stretch and challenge the most able pupils. Consequently, the outcomes for more-able pupils are not yet good. You are aware of this and have effective plans in place to address this issue. It is too early to see the impact of these plans on pupils' outcomes.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers plan tasks that sufficiently stretch and challenge pupils, especially the most able pupils, so that they make the progress of which they are capable
- assessment information is analysed and collated more effectively so that leaders can easily spot how well groups of pupils are achieving and share that information more swiftly with governors.

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

Yours sincerely

Bianka Zemke  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During the inspection, inspectors met with you, members of the senior leadership team and three governors including the chair. They spoke informally with pupils during lessons and at break and lunchtimes. Inspectors visited several classes with senior leaders and spoke with learners about their work. Inspectors scrutinised several documents including the school's self-evaluation, safeguarding and child protection records, external review documents and achievement information. Parents' views were considered through the 44 responses to 'Parent View', Ofsted's online questionnaire. Staff's and pupils' views were considered through the 38 staff and 51 pupil responses to Ofsted's online questionnaires. Inspectors visited the on-site Bungalow and observed the support and care on offer there.