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Ms Katie Dixon
Birches Head Academy
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Dear Ms Dixon

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Birches Head Academy

Following my visit to your school on 4 July 2019, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the monitoring 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 monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school has received a judgement of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

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

The school should take further action to:

- ensure that teachers routinely plan lessons that take account of pupils' needs and abilities, especially the needs of the most able pupils, so that they complete work that is closely matched to their capabilities
- ensure that all staff consistently apply the school's behaviour policy, especially out of lesson time
- embed fully and analyse effectively the most recently introduced improvement strategies for their impact on pupils' progress.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, senior and middle leaders and members of the governing body, including the chair of governors. A meeting was held with two representatives from the local authority. The school's improvement and self-evaluation documents were evaluated. The lead inspector and senior leaders visited classrooms to observe learning in English, science, mathematics, history, geography, modern foreign languages and religious education during learning walks. She also looked at pupils' work and sought pupils' views in discussions. The lead inspector observed pupils' behaviour during lessons, lesson changeover times and lunchtime and spoke to many pupils about their school. Staff, including support staff, were able to share their views in informal discussions with the lead inspector.

Context

Since the time of the last inspection, the school has faced some challenges, including staff changes. A new deputy headteacher joined the school and a notable number of new staff have been appointed for September 2019, while others have left the school. The school is set to grow, with a large increase in pupil numbers for next year's Year 7 cohort.

Main findings

You have promoted a renewed sense of purpose and drive to improve the school. You have changed the school's ethos and worked hard to rebuild the school's reputation within the local community. As a result, many more parents and carers are choosing this school for their children. You know the school well, accurately evaluate its effectiveness and are focused on improving the standard of education for your pupils. Other senior leaders, some who are new to their roles, are also making a positive contribution to the development of a new direction. Staff, including middle leaders, are responding well to the changes and are keen to continue to improve their practice. Improvements are now evident, for example in pupils' behaviour, attendance and in the quality of teaching and learning.

You and your leaders have worked well to address the areas for improvement identified by the previous inspection and continue to do so. Leaders now monitor the effectiveness of teaching and learning regularly. You put effective training for staff in place that is now more bespoke to their individual needs. Teachers speak highly of the support and training they receive so that they can further improve their practice. Opportunities for staff to learn from each other and share best practice are also now provided. As result, the quality of teaching has improved, although more work remains to be done in some subject areas. You have well-focused plans in place to address this.

Redesigned assessment systems now ensure that pupils' progress is tracked carefully. Consequently, leaders now know when pupils fall behind and are able to put targeted interventions in place to help them catch up.

In the past, leaders entered pupils in Year 10 for their English Literature GCSE examinations. This early entry was not effective practice, as results from these exams showed that pupils did not reach their full potential and achieved outcomes that were too low for their abilities. Leaders have now made the decision to cease this practice.

You actively seek and engage effectively with external support to improve the school further. For example, a national leader of education (NLE) has worked closely with you and your senior colleagues to provide support, challenge and mentorship. You have secured additional funding to be able to continue improvement work within certain subject areas and focus more closely on classroom practices. Governors provide effective support and challenge to you and your colleagues. They know the school very well and have a clear view of what works well and what needs to improve further.

You have introduced effective improvement strategies. The new 'non-negotiables' strategy that details your expectations of teaching is ensuring that teachers follow minimum expectations. Some strategies have fairly recently been introduced. Therefore, they are not yet embedded fully or have had time to have a positive effect. For some of them, it is simply too soon to see the full impact on pupils' progress.

Teachers have good relationships with pupils and know them well. They model answers clearly and ensure that pupils know what they need to do to succeed. Teaching has improved and continues to improve further. Some teachers do not yet routinely use the information they have about their pupils' prior learning to plan tasks that stretch their thinking and deepen their learning. When this happens, pupils are given tasks that are more of the same rather than providing additional challenge to them. As a result, pupils, especially the most able pupils, are not achieving as well as they should.

Attendance has improved notably and incidents where pupils miss long periods of school have declined. This is further testimony to improved provision at school. You and your colleagues have built effective relationships with parents and, as a result, parents now understand the value of regular attendance.

Middle leaders form a dedicated group of professionals who now play a part in driving improvements. They monitor the quality of provision in their subjects and address issues that they identify. Middle leaders are complimentary about the support you and other senior leaders provide. They say that they now feel empowered, supported and listened to by senior leaders. Middle leaders work well together; they share best practice with each other and colleagues from other schools. This helps them to continue to raise standards in their subject areas.

Recent improvements made by you in changing the culture and ethos of the school are evident. Staff usually have high expectations of pupils, and pupils generally respond well to this. As a result, behaviour in lessons is now much improved.

However, there remains a small number of staff who do not consistently apply the new behaviour policy, especially outside of lesson times. When this happens, pupils display behaviours that fall short of your high expectations.

External support

You have engaged effectively with support, including that provided by colleagues from other schools, for example to secure a review of the school's use of the pupil premium funding. When areas for improvement have been highlighted, you and your colleagues have acted on many of the suggestions made, and the consequent improvements are evident. A clear strength is your willingness to engage with others in order to improve your practice and the life chances of the young people at your school.

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

Yours sincerely

Bianka Zemke
Her Majesty's Inspector