



20 July 2005

Ms K Healey
Headteacher
Birches Head High School
Hanley
Stoke-on-Trent
Staffordshire
ST2 8DD

Dear Ms Healey

Implementation of Birches Head High School's Action Plan

Following the visit of Michelle Parker HMI, David Simpson HMI and Phil Davies, Additional Inspector, to your school on 29 and 30 June 2005, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings which are recorded in the attached note.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures. The focus of the inspection was to assess: the quality of the action plan; the pupils' standards of attainment and their progress; the quality of education provided; the leadership and management of the school; the pupils' attitudes and behaviour; and the progress that has been made in implementing the action plan.

The school's action plan is satisfactory overall with some weaknesses.

The weaknesses outlined in the fourth paragraph of the note of the inspection findings should be addressed and amendments prepared by the second monitoring inspection.

The LEA's statement of action is satisfactory.

The school has made limited progress since being subject to special measures.

The LEA's target date of spring 2007 for the removal of special measures is realistic.

The school is permitted to appoint one newly qualified teacher in each of English and religious education, subject to the conditions and agreement for support discussed during the inspection.

I am copying this letter and the note of the inspection findings to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education and Lifelong Learning for Stoke-on-Trent. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Reid
Head of Institutional Inspections and Frameworks Division

IMPLEMENTATION OF BIRCHES HEAD HIGH SCHOOL'S ACTION PLAN

Findings of the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures

During the visit 25 lessons or parts of lessons, one registration session and one assembly were inspected. Meetings were held with the headteacher, the chair of governors and a representative of the LEA. Informal discussions were held with other members of staff and with pupils and samples of work were examined. A range of documents was scrutinised. Using this evidence, HMI made the following observations to the headteacher, the chair of the governing body and the representative from the LEA.

The school's action plan is satisfactory overall. Its strengths are that it systematically identifies the key issues outlined in the inspection report and clearly links these to objectives which bear on the priorities for improvement. Key personnel are correctly identified. All actions are time lined appropriately. However there are too many objectives; there are 19 attaching to the first area for improvement alone, and many are duplicated, and so the main thrust of the improvement plan becomes lost. Many actions are not founded on a sufficiently thorough analysis of what is required to lever up standards. The actions and success criteria are often insufficiently clear to enable outcomes to be evaluated. Monitoring activities have not securely tracked progress because milestones are not clearly identified and responsible staff and methods are not consistently indicated.

The LEA's statement of action is satisfactory. The statement provides clear details of the tasks to be undertaken in supporting the school to address each area for improvement. The plan shows the number of days of support together with appropriate personnel for monitoring the school's progress. The addition of a consultant headteacher and two LEA governors appropriately strengthens the leadership and management. However inclusion and special education needs provision is insufficiently supported at present.

Attainment on entry to the school is below average. In 2004, the pupils' results in the end-of-Key-Stage 3 National Curriculum tests and in the GCSE examinations were well below average compared with all schools nationally.

In 2004 the proportion of the pupils achieving the expected Level 5 or above in national tests at Key Stage 3 in English rose from 57 per cent to 62 per cent and in mathematics from 58 per cent to 60 per cent; in science it declined from 56 per cent to 53 per cent, in line with the national dip in Key Stage 3 science results in 2004 of around two per cent.

At Key Stage 4, the proportion of the pupils achieving the expected five or more A*-C grades at GCSE fell slightly by one per cent to 32 per cent. The proportion of the pupils achieving five or more A*-G grades also declined from 88 per cent to

85 per cent. Ninety seven per cent of the pupils attained one or more GCSE grades, in line with the average for all schools nationally.

The achievement of most pupils by the end of Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, indicated by performance in the 2004 tests and examinations, was lower than the national expectation. In the lessons inspected, too few of the pupils made sufficient progress and achievement overall was unsatisfactory.

The quality of teaching was satisfactory or better in around two thirds of the lessons including a quarter where it was good or better. In these lessons the teachers planned effectively and set clear objectives which the pupils understood. This ensured that pupils tackled activities with confidence and enabled them to achieve the learning objectives. Teachers in these lessons managed pupils well. They insisted on high standards of behaviour and clearly communicated appropriately high learning expectations. Pupils responded positively. The lessons were well resourced and the interactive whiteboard was used effectively. Teachers were enthusiastic and had good subject knowledge about the topics to be taught thus exposition was clear and communicated principles well. In a mathematics lesson the well established classroom routines, the clarity of instruction and probing questioning drove pupils' progress despite their poor confidence as learners. In a design and technology lesson the teacher effectively modelled what the pupils were soon to make, which enabled them to achieve the high quality work of which they were proud.

In the lessons judged to be unsatisfactory or barely satisfactory, planning was inadequate and the work was not well matched to individual pupils' needs. Some teachers have insufficient expertise to pitch the work at an appropriate level. The learning activities were not interesting and so pupils did not engage effectively with them and made little progress. Teachers paid too little attention to the pupils' literacy needs, for example failing to provide appropriate support to structure their writing. Starters and plenaries were poorly planned and executed and teacher exposition did not prompt responses from pupils to promote reflection. Consequently in these lessons greater effort was exerted by teachers on managing behaviour than on promoting learning.

The quality of learning was satisfactory or better in two thirds of the lessons seen, and in one in six of the lessons the pupils were making good progress. The pupils were appropriately challenged to make intellectual effort and to be creative and so they acquired new skills and knowledge. They were productive and worked, often at a fast pace, to ensure that they completed a given task on time. Whilst close teacher supervision ensured that many pupils were able to sustain concentration, it was rare to see them achieve as independent learners. In an English lesson the pupils were interested in the writing task and applied themselves well to make very good progress. In a relatively high attaining Key Stage 3 English class pupils demonstrated maturity and sensitivity in their analysis of poetry usually studied at GCSE. In a science lesson pupils made effective use of their Individual

Achievement Plans to clearly describe the strategy they needed to use to improve their work.

Where learning was unsatisfactory or worse the pupils did not understand the purpose of the learning activity or what they were required to do. Thus they were unable to apply themselves and were easily distracted. Their poor behaviour included frequent use of foul language which was not always challenged by the teacher. In these classes the pupils' exercise books indicate that progress over time is poor, with much unfinished work and poor presentation. Teachers did not deploy learning support assistants effectively.

The quality of leadership and management of the school is satisfactory overall. A new headteacher had been appointed shortly before the inspection. She has been working hard with the LEA to address the issue of underachievement. The headteacher's direction of the school's work is satisfactory. However, although she has worked hard to inspire and motivate staff, the clear vision of where the school needs to be, has not been adequately shared with all the staff.

The senior leadership team broadly shares this vision. The recent restructuring of the team has improved their effectiveness. They are now increasingly able to meet the new demands placed upon them. External support is effectively managed and judicious selection is building the school's capacity. The training of senior and middle managers is providing appropriate encouragement for them to take on more responsibility. The headteacher has a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of middle managers. However the quality of the monitoring of their work by senior managers is not consistent. Clear links have been established between performance management and the implementation of the action plan. An appropriate plan has been agreed with the LEA to achieve a balanced budget within a fixed period.

The governance of the school is satisfactory. Governors have a sound understanding of the school's current strengths and weaknesses. They meet regularly and are beginning to present an appropriately robust challenge to the school in areas where they have concerns. They are now in a much stronger position to hold the school accountable for its performance. They can articulate a vision for raising standards in the school focused upon improving parents' and carers' involvement in pupils' education.

The pupils' attitudes were satisfactory or better in two thirds of the lessons and good or better in a fifth. In a few of the lessons, the pupils responded positively to high expectations, actively engaged in group work and enjoyed the opportunities to solve problems. However, in too many lessons, the pupils were lethargic and tolerated rather than actively participated in tasks. They lacked confidence or were reticent to engage with the tasks and did not sustain their concentration or effort, being too readily satisfied with superficial responses. When teaching was insufficiently challenging or the teachers did not have effective strategies to manage behaviour, the pupils became quickly bored and disruptive.

The leadership of the school understands that it faces significant challenges in overcoming poor attitudes to learning. Insufficient attention is paid to acknowledging and rewarding the hard work of individuals in lessons. Improvements to the pastoral system are planned for September to increase the focus upon the pupils' academic progress. Too many of the pupils, particularly in the older years, are embarrassed by success. The school has an outline of how it will monitor the pupils' attitudes and the management of their behaviour. The introduction of student leadership teams to voice the views of the pupils is a judicious development. The pupils have strong and pertinent views about how learning and relationships could be improved. However, the school has much work to do in engaging the pupil population as a whole in their education.

The rate of attendance for the academic year 2004-5 is 91.6 per cent which is an improvement on the previous year and is broadly in line with the national median. However, during the inspection the rate of attendance in the classes inspected was only 75 per cent. Punctuality is not good enough; at least 89 pupils arrived after the start of registration on the second morning of the visit and staff do not ensure that the pupils move between lessons with sufficient urgency. Some pupils smoke at the beginning and end of the day on the school premises and this is unacceptable.

The behaviour of the pupils around the school was, however, satisfactory overall. A significant staff presence fosters order but there were incidences of intolerance, threatening behaviour and inappropriate language. The site is litter strewn and the poor state of repair of some fencing presents a safety hazard. The assembly effectively promoted reflection on bullying through an engaging drama presentation performed by older pupils. The number of days lost to fixed-term exclusions has reduced this year to 765 but remains high. The number of days lost to fixed-term exclusions for this term has significantly declined to 145. One pupil was permanently excluded this year, 18 pupils have made managed moves to other schools in the City and four have moved to Birches Head.

Despite recent training, the pupils' behaviour in lessons is tackled inconsistently by teachers. Some teachers too readily accept rudeness and insolence whilst others are overly confrontational. A significant cadre are able to establish effective relationships through mutual respect and inspirational teaching. Too many of the school's strategies, such as the "quiet room" and detentions which consist of meaningless work in deliberately highly visible school rooms militate against establishing positive adjustments to the pupils' behaviour. The student support centre has a more effective ethos based upon the social development of the pupils.

The quality of support from the LEA is good. The school has received a high level of practical and financial support from the LEA. The LEA has worked closely with the school and has a very clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses.

Action taken to address the areas for improvement

1: improve the effectiveness of teaching through better use of assessment and rigorous implementation of the various national strategies

An assessment policy has been produced which clearly identifies the key roles and responsibilities involved in tracking progress to target intervention to effectively improve attainment. An electronic recording system has been trialled, which requires key assessment tasks to be written into schemes of work and the results entered into each subject's database at regular intervals. This information is relayed to pupils, parents and carers and is used by both academic and pastoral managers to monitor individual learners' progress, set targets and trigger intervention when necessary. All teachers receive a comprehensive bank of data about each pupil's prior attainment and potential. However teachers do not adopt consistent approaches to make effective use of this data in their planning. Scrutiny of the pupils' exercise books reveals variable practice also in the quality of teachers' marking. In some subjects, including religious education and English, teachers provide clear and helpful feedback to pupils. However many teachers' marking in other subjects does not inform pupils of the standard of their work or what they need to do to improve.

A system for monitoring and evaluating the performance of teachers has been established underpinned by a clear rationale for supporting professional development needs. However analysis of monitoring is not yet precise enough to give the senior leadership team a reliable understanding of all teachers' strengths and weaknesses. Training for all teachers to improve planning, including the use of differentiated learning objectives, has taken place. All teachers are using the school's lesson plan proforma when being observed; however, the quality of planning remains variable. When not being observed teachers are expected to use the 'block planner' which records planning over a number of lessons. At present not all teachers are handing these in to their head of department. The school recognises the need for close monitoring to bolster the effectiveness of this approach, particularly in departments where schemes of work are poor or include a recent innovation. The school has been successful in raising teachers' awareness of the need to plan lessons which focus on learning. More work is required to ensure that teaching consistently engages pupils in learning activities.

Progress is limited.

2: improve pupils' skills in literacy and their use of number across the curriculum

This area was not evaluated on this visit.

3: improve provision for pupils with special educational needs and for those for whom English is a second language

Progress has been hampered by the school's failure to appoint a special needs co-ordinator until January 2006 at the earliest. The school is offering a substantial salary which accurately gauges the need to attract a highly effective professional capable of urgently addressing the learning and behavioural needs of a significant proportion of the school's population. Currently the learning support manager temporarily responsible for the day-to-day management of this area is absent.

An effective inclusion forum has been established to consider the pupils whose learning and behavioural needs have been identified by staff. A report system is being trialled which establishes four levels of calibrated response to behavioural issues. Appropriately, this will be evaluated and refined before being adopted across the school as a whole from the start of the next academic year. The school recognises the need for training in order to improve the effectiveness of teachers and equip them with the strategies to support the pupils. Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are inadequately used: teachers refer to the plans of pupils who have left the school, some pupils are unaware of their IEP and two forms of IEP are unhelpfully running concurrently in the school at present.

Improvements to the provision for the pupils with English as an additional language include helpful revisions to schemes of work which support the acquisition of school-related vocabulary, opportunities to participate in a college based course, guidance on assertiveness and additional training for the teaching assistant with lead responsibility for the assessment of the pupils' needs. However, linguistic profiling is at a very early stage, the monitoring of assessment has not yet been formalised and the analysis of grouping arrangements and the impact upon attainment of the frequency of the use of English in familial and social contexts has not been undertaken. Lesson planning does not yet adequately identify or address the linguistic and social needs of pupils with English as an additional language.

Progress is limited.

4: improve the effectiveness of management and ensure that governors discharge their responsibilities fully

A leading learning group has been convened to identify and share good practice in the school. This is beginning to foster a greater awareness of the good practice. Protocols are now in place that link performance management to the school's action plan. National standards are now used to evaluate middle managers. Phased training is underway for coaching and peer planning. Greater accountability has been introduced at middle management level, but this is yet to extend to all staff. Middle managers are not taking steps to bring about improvements quickly enough.

Progress is limited.

5: improve the use of information and communication technology across the curriculum

This area was not evaluated on this visit.

6: ensure that statutory requirements in mathematics, design and technology, physical education, citizenship, religious education and for a daily act of collective worship are met

This area was not evaluated on this visit.