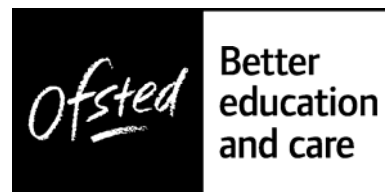


Tribal Education  
1-4 Portland Square  
Bristol  
BS2 8RR

T 0845 123 6001  
F 0845 123 6002

Ofsted helpline  
08456 404045  
edhelpline@ofsted.gov.uk



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

28 February 2006

Dear Ms Healey

## **SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF BIRCHES HEAD HIGH SCHOOL**

### **Introduction**

Following my visit with John Lilly, Peter Clifton and John English, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 22 and 23 February 2006, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in January 2005.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

### **Evidence**

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the headteacher, groups of pupils, a number of the staff, the chair and vice-chair of governors and a representative from the local authority (LA).

### **Context**

The school has vacancies in mathematics but has filled the leadership posts in that subject and in music. The leadership post in physical education will be filled in April 2006.

## **Achievement and standards**

Pupils come into the school with below average results in tests for 11 year olds. Standards at the end of Year 9 in 2005 were well below average and pupils' achievement was inadequate. Pupils made broadly satisfactory progress in English but in mathematics and science progress was much weaker and too low.

In 2005, the proportion of pupils who achieved five or more GCSE grades C or above was well below the national average. The proportion of pupils achieving five or more A\*–G grades improved significantly to above the national average. Overall achievement in Key Stage 4 was satisfactory. It was good in English but inadequate in mathematics. The school narrowly missed targets set for the proportion attaining five A\*–C but exceeded the target for A\*–G.

Pupils with special educational needs achieved standards in line with those expected of them. Overall, pupils make satisfactory progress in English but poor progress in mathematics. In particular, more-able pupils and boys in the middle ability range are underachieving. The school has accurately identified these groups.

The school has secure systems to monitor the pupils' progress and attainment. Currently the school's tracking information suggests that pupils are on course to achieve their targets.

Literacy skills continue to be developed well through a whole-school drive to increase opportunities for pupils to talk about their work and through a variety of strategies to support lower attaining pupils. However, although standards in technical aspects of reading and writing are improving, pupils' understanding of meaning and application of language lags behind. Pupils' achievement is hampered by a difficulty in expressing their ideas and thoughts and in grasping the meaning in what they hear. When required, the pupils apply their numerical skills effectively in areas across the curriculum. However, the teachers fail to exploit the potential of subjects other than mathematics to broaden these skills.

In lessons, pupils' overall standards were around, and occasionally just below, the standards expected for their ages. The rate of progress was usually at least satisfactory in all lessons.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2005:

- improve pupils' skills in literacy and their use of number across the curriculum—satisfactory progress.

## **Personal development and well-being**

Pupils' personal development is satisfactory and continues to improve. Pupils are willing to learn and involve themselves in the activities the school offers. They enjoy school and value what they learn. The student leadership programme benefits not only those involved but is also creating role models for others to emulate. Even so, the pupils as a whole have yet to become eager learners and, therefore, they do as they are asked rather than set their own objectives or plan independently how to meet them. They have insufficient skills and determination to move forward without the support of staff. The personal, health, social and citizenship education course is well planned and beginning to show benefits.

Pupils' attitudes to their learning are satisfactory although they do not yet show the independence necessary to effectively improve their work for themselves. Behaviour is good around the school and in most lessons. There has been improvement in both attitudes and behaviour. Pupils are now proud of their school and keen to play their part in its improvement. They say that this is because they see the benefits that will come from their effort and commitment. When attitudes or behaviour are unsatisfactory this is usually attributable to only a small number of boys.

There is little evidence of bullying or racist behaviour. Both pupils and staff say that when these rare incidents happen they are dealt with effectively and that the pupil body in general does not approve of such behaviour. This good picture is the result of the strong expectations promoted by the school.

## **Quality of provision**

The quality of teaching continues to improve. The school believes that around 85% of lessons are satisfactory and inspectors' observations confirm this.

Planning has improved and most lessons are now based on a set of clear learning objectives and differentiated outcomes which are shared with the pupils at the beginning of the lessons. In the best cases this leads to lively lessons. These sessions had a variety of interesting and sometimes imaginative activities, enlivened by the effective use of interactive whiteboards, which engaged the pupils and supported learning. In some cases it was not clear how the objectives had determined the content of the lesson. Some teachers do not make a clear distinction between the learning outcomes and what the pupils will do during the lesson.

Teachers demonstrated improved understanding of the need to check pupils' learning during the lesson, for example, in the 'mini-plenaries' seen on many lesson plans. However, despite the planning these often did not take place or were rather ineffective when they did. The quality of the feedback offered to pupils has improved. In many lessons pupils are told the level at which they are working and given appropriate suggestions for improvement and the

strategies to achieve this improvement. In many classrooms the National Curriculum level descriptors displayed on walls helped the pupils to assess their work. A very good example of how self assessment supported learning was seen in an information and communication technology lesson (ICT).

The practice of tracking pupils against their target levels is well established and mostly based on sound data. The school accepts that in some cases the target levels are not yet as challenging or as secure as they should be, particularly in Key Stage 3. However, the range of intervention strategies is good and provides considerable support for pupils identified at risk of underachievement.

The provision for the care and welfare of pupils is satisfactory and improving. Pupils with learning difficulties, both academic and behavioural, are well supported through the two specialised units. However, support within lessons is inconsistent and this reduces the longer-term benefits of these interventions.

Support for pupils learning English as an additional language is satisfactory. It is well managed and is now based upon accurate assessment of these pupils' needs. Managers have a clear understanding of what still needs to be done. Progress is accurately evaluated and the support available is well focused. However, there is insufficient specialised support available to meet the needs of all these pupils. Similarly, the quality of support would benefit from greater coordination with other learning support provision.

The school's strategy to improve the use of ICT is good. Resources purchased are being well used in classes. ICT provision is very effectively monitored and targets set in the action plan have been greatly exceeded.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2005:

- improve the effectiveness of teaching through better use of assessment and rigorous implementation of various national strategies—satisfactory progress
- improve provision for pupils with special educational needs and those with English as an additional language—satisfactory progress
- improve the use of information and communication technology across the curriculum—good progress
- ensure that statutory requirements in mathematics, design and technology, physical education, citizenship, religious education and for a daily act of collective worship are met—met in full.

### **Leadership and management**

Leadership and management have continued to improve and are now good overall. The strong leadership of the headteacher has continued to move the school forward. Members of the senior leadership team now have a clear

understanding of teaching and learning. This has enabled them to ensure that skilful strategies are used to manage change. The leadership group has an accurate picture of the school's strengths and weaknesses which is used effectively to identify appropriate areas for support. It regularly reviews its milestones and ensures that the drive for improvement is kept in sharp focus and that targets are refined to reflect the progress achieved. The school's capacity to improve continues to grow.

Middle management is satisfactory overall. Line management structures ensure that heads of department are supported effectively. The newly restructured Teaching and Learning Responsibilities (TLRs) have appropriately created five teams that focus on teaching across areas and utilise peer planning efficiently. The careful pairing of subjects has ensured that each partner has a strength which complements an area for development in the other.

The governance of the school remains good. Governors are able to use their knowledge of the school's strengths and weaknesses to question staff appropriately and actively seek clarification.

The support for newly qualified teachers continues to be effective and they can clearly articulate strategies which have been used to promote learning.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2005:

- improve the effectiveness of management and ensure that governors discharge their responsibility fully—good progress.

### **External support**

The LA and other partners are ensuring that the school develops independence and capacity to sustain improvement by appropriately scaling down their level of support.

### **Main Judgements**

Progress since being subject to special measures—satisfactory progress.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection—satisfactory progress.

### **Priorities for further improvement**

- Ensure that higher attaining pupils and middle attaining boys are appropriately challenged within lessons to ensure they make at least satisfactory progress.

- Ensure that pupils with special educational needs and those speaking English as an additional language are making sufficient progress in mainstream lessons.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children and Young People's Services for Stoke-on-Trent.

Yours sincerely

Michelle Parker  
**H M Inspector**