

Birches Head High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	124390
Local Authority	Stoke-On-Trent
Inspection number	314914
Inspection dates	25–26 June 2008
Reporting inspector	Elaine Taylor HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	750
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Steve Barlow
Headteacher	Karen Healey
Date of previous school inspection	21 June 2006
School address	Birches Head Road Hanley Stoke-on-Trent ST2 8DD
Telephone number	01782 233595
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Age group	11-16
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Birches Head High School is an 11–16 mixed comprehensive school serving a diverse community from the Birches Head, Northwood, Shelton and Abbey Hulton areas of Stoke-on-Trent. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is above the national average, as is the proportion requiring additional support for their learning. This includes an increasing number of students with English as an additional language. The number of students from minority ethnic groups is also rising. An above average number of students arrive and leave at different times during the school year. The school is a full-extended services school.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Birches Head is a satisfactory school that is continuing to improve as a result of the determined efforts of the staff, under the strong leadership of the headteacher and the extended leadership team. Issues from the previous inspection have been dealt with well and some aspects of the school's work that were previously judged as satisfactory are now good.

Careful analysis of the progress students are making, rigorous monitoring of the school's work by middle and senior leaders and accurate self-evaluation have enabled the school to identify priorities and direct their efforts to those areas needing the greatest attention. The school has identified the need to tackle low attendance and poor attitudes to learning, as these were real barriers to raising standards. The impact of the work done to address these priorities is most evident in the significant rise in attendance and fall in exclusions.

Students enter the school with standards that are broadly average. By the time they leave the school, their standards are average, indicating satisfactory progress. However, in Key Stage 3, progress, although satisfactory, is slower than in Key Stage 4. The school has identified a need to address the students' weaker study skills and has made innovative changes to the curriculum in Year 7, in order to address this issue. Early indications are that this is having a positive impact, especially on attitudes and enjoyment, although it is too soon for any impact to be seen on standards and achievement.

It is in aspects of students' personal development that the greatest impact of the school's work is evident. This is satisfactory overall, but students show an increased awareness of how to stay healthy and safe. The school has achieved the Healthy Schools award and most students show a good awareness of how to live healthy lifestyles. A high proportion of students choose to eat healthy options at lunchtime and take part in sporting activities. The school gives them a wide range of opportunities to influence decision making in the school and this work has been recognised as an example of best practice at a national level. Many take part in projects to improve the school environment and help to evaluate the quality of teaching and of the curriculum. They are becoming increasingly involved in projects within the local community. Students socialise well and behaviour in public spaces is considerate and calm. They do not demonstrate a particularly deep understanding of cultural or spiritual issues, because they are not given enough opportunities across the curriculum to reflect and discuss such matters.

Teaching and learning are judged by the school to be satisfactory and the inspectors agree with this judgement. Much work has been done to improve the quality of teaching. Teachers plan carefully and their lessons have many positive features. They generally give the students interesting activities that motivate them, but sometimes these do not provide sufficient challenge, because there is insufficient focus on the skills and knowledge teachers want the students to acquire. In these lessons, the behaviour of some students is poor and progress slow.

The curriculum is good and offers students personalised pathways in Years 10 and 11. By working with a wide range of partners, the school is able to meet the specific needs of individuals well. Students with low levels of literacy and numeracy are able to follow alternative courses and investment in information and communication technology (ICT) has enabled all students to improve their skills in this subject. In addition, opportunities to follow a range of vocational courses support the development of skills needed for students' future employment. As a result, more students leave the school and continue in education or in jobs with training than is usual in the local area.

The students are supported and cared for well and this has helped to reduce the barriers to learning experienced by some. Students feel safe and extended services are used well to provide additional support. The guidance given to students when moving from one stage of their education to the next is good. Systems to guide them as to their next steps in learning are developing, but are not yet fully embedded.

The headteacher has successfully created a culture in the school where leaders at all levels share a common and determined vision that is continuing to produce improvements on many fronts. The majority of parents who responded to the questionnaire are fully supportive of the school and recognise the many improvements. As one commented: 'I feel my son is getting an all-round education and the school is going from strength to strength.' Another listed many improvements that are evident, including the fact that 'The school is a much happier and child-friendly place.'

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards, especially in Key Stage 3.
- Ensure teachers use a consistent approach to managing disruptive behaviour in lessons.
- Ensure all students are taught the specific skills they need in each subject and are regularly provided with challenging activities in lessons.
- Improve opportunities for students to reflect on spiritual and cultural issues.

A small proportion of schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Achievement has been variable in recent years. Progress in Years 7 to 9 has been slower than in Key Stage 4, where it has been good. Standards in national tests in 2007 were below average, especially in Key Stage 3 and among the girls. This represented a substantial decline from the good results in the previous year. The school has taken effective action to halt this decline, primarily by tackling staffing issues in mathematics. Current data show that standards at the end of Key Stage 4 for this year will be broadly average. A similar improvement is evident in Key Stage 3 and in the achievement of the girls, which is now in line with that of the boys. The progress of students needing additional help with their learning is similar to that of other students in the school. The growing number of students for whom English is an additional language are given good support to help them to acquire the necessary language skills as quickly as possible.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

Students told inspectors that they enjoy coming to school and this is reflected in much improved attendance figures. Most students behave sensibly, but in some lessons the poor concentration and immature attitudes of a small number results in behaviour that interrupts the work of the class. Students work together in groups and socialise around the school, but are less confident when required to work independently. Students contribute to the wider community well through charity work and voluntary activity. They feel safe because bullying and racist incidents are rare and are handled well by the school when they do occur. They develop satisfactorily the

skills that will be of use to them in adult life. Aspects of their spiritual and cultural development are satisfactory, but there are too few opportunities across the curriculum for students to discuss issues relating to cultural diversity and to reflect on beliefs and values.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

In most lessons, students work well at the tasks they have been set and there are good relationships. Progress in lessons is satisfactory as a result. Teachers share the aims of the lesson with students and often refer to them during the lesson to make sure the pace of learning does not slow. Many of the strategies used to improve the quality of teaching are still not embedded fully in everyday practice across the school. As a result, too much emphasis is placed on what teachers want the students to do and not enough on the quality of the learning that is intended to take place. Students are assessed regularly and know the National Curriculum levels they have reached. They are taught to assess their own work and this is very effective in vocational subjects such as ICT.

Teachers still do not take sufficient account of the different levels the students have reached in their previous work when planning the next steps in their learning. The marking of students' work does not consistently give feedback on how to improve. Homework is not being used consistently well to extend the learning that is taking place in school. The school has recently sought to address this issue using the school's website to provide a bank of additional learning opportunities. Teachers are working together well to integrate new approaches to the delivery of the curriculum. This has led to greater motivation for younger students and increased confidence. Teaching assistants effectively support those students who require additional help.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

For students in Year 7, the school is pioneering the development of a 'Futures Curriculum' that involves grouping different subjects with teams of teachers responsible for delivering the programme. In addition, generic themes reflecting the Every Child Matters agenda are shaping the learning tasks being undertaken. For example, an activity based on enterprise was the focus of an ICT lesson, where students were expected to work in teams with demarcated tasks to realise the lesson objectives. This curriculum is starting to have an impact on both standards and attitudes to learning and is being extended to Year 8 next year. In Years 10 and 11, the school's curriculum is driven by the students' interests and chosen career paths. The school works well with other schools, a local college and other organisations in order to offer good vocational provision and a wide range of options. This contributes directly to the success of the school in promoting good progress in learning in Years 10 and 11. There are well advanced plans in place for a diploma in media studies in 2009. A range of popular extra-curricular activities supplements the formal curriculum. More able students are encouraged to take advantage of additional external provision, but their needs are less well met within the school.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The care and support provided by the school are good. Sufficient attention is paid to keeping students safe, with appropriate levels of adult supervision at all times. The systems in place to

promote good attendance have been very effective in reducing absences and the school works in collaboration with a good range of outside agencies to support vulnerable students and their families. Work to improve the unacceptable behaviour of a minority of students has been highly successful, as incidents of such behaviour are now rare, and exclusions have fallen dramatically. Teachers are beginning to manage behaviour in classrooms more effectively and, as a result, fewer students are disrupting the learning of others. The school has a learning support unit to provide personalized learning pathways for extremely vulnerable students. Arrangements to ensure a smooth transition from one phase to another are good and guidance on career options is satisfactory. The school has good systems to gather information on individual progress and students know the level at which they are working and what their targets are. These are shared regularly with parents and there are regular opportunities for them to discuss their child's progress.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The strong leadership of the headteacher and the senior team has continued to move the school forward. Much has been achieved in a short time to improve the ethos of the school and raise aspirations. All members of the school community contribute to the development of the school. Leaders at all levels are clear about the school's strengths and areas for improvement and are equally committed to raising standards. The school monitors its performance rigorously and this process has enabled its leaders to identify accurately the areas for improvement that are most urgent and to target intervention with greater effect. The school sets increasingly challenging targets based on careful analysis of the data the school gathers on students' progress. This is then used to evaluate the effectiveness of the work of departments. Self-evaluation is accurate and takes into account the views of parents and students, who contribute greatly to the process by taking a full and active part. The school has worked hard to involve parents more in their children's education. There are increased opportunities to meet and discuss their children's progress and support is available through the extended services that the school provides. Management teams have been restructured to promote the sharing of good practice. Governors are very knowledgeable about the school, committed to it and they provide a good balance of support and challenge. Careful financial management means the previous budget deficit has been cleared and the school is providing good value for money by continuing to improve provision despite these financial constraints. Given the improvements made, its capacity to improve further is good.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	3

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	3
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2
How well learners enjoy their education	2
The attendance of learners	2
The behaviour of learners	3
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

27 June 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Birches Head High School, Stoke-on-Trent, ST2 8DD

On behalf of my colleagues and myself, I should like to thank you all for the way you welcomed us into your school and shared your views with us so sensibly and thoughtfully.

We think your school is satisfactory and improving, with some of its work now being good. You have made a strong contribution to those improvements with better attendance and punctuality and by the way you help the school to decide on the priorities. The projects you have initiated to improve the school environment have made the buildings even more pleasant; we particularly liked the plants and garden areas and the improvements that have been made to the menus in the canteen.

You told us that you appreciate the way the school provides individual learning opportunities in Years 10 and 11. Those of you in Year 7 who are enjoying the new curriculum were enthusiastic about the more interesting activities teachers were providing for you. We think the school cares for and supports you well and is starting to give you lots of information about how well you are doing and what you need to do to improve further.

We have asked the school to make improvements in some areas.

- Ensure teachers are more effective and consistent in managing the way some of you behave in lessons so no one interferes with the learning of others. You all have a part to play by making sure you act in a mature way in all lessons.
- Achieve better results in tests and examinations. You could help if you took full advantage of all the things the school is already doing, such as providing homework ideas online.
- Ensure activities in lessons help you develop your knowledge and skills and that tasks are suitably challenging.
- Provide more opportunities for you to think about spiritual and cultural issues.

I hope you will read my full report that contains more detail and I wish you all every success in the future.

Elaine Taylor Her Majesty's Inspector