

Birchwood Community High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	111444
Local Authority	Warrington
Inspection number	325385
Inspection dates	4–5 December 2008
Reporting inspector	Linda Tetik 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 (total)	929
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Barry Sanson
Headteacher	Miss Anne Bright
Date of previous school inspection	1 March 2006
School address	Brock Road Birchwood Warrington Cheshire WA3 7PT
Telephone number	01925 827322
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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

Birchwood Community High School is a Business and Enterprise College with Applied Learning Specialism. It is an average sized school and serves an area where levels of social and economic disadvantage are wide ranging. The number of students eligible for a free school meal is around the national average. The percentage of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below average, but there is a higher than average percentage of students with statements of special educational need. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is below average. Recent awards for the school include the International School Award, the Artsmark Gold Award and the Healthy Schools Award.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Birchwood Community High School is an outstanding school. Most notably, there is a very strong commitment to inclusion and achievement for all learners. Standards are above the national average and the progress that students make is outstanding. Standards at Key Stage 4 demonstrate year-on-year improvement to well above national averages. Behaviour overall is exemplary. The school provides an environment where students feel safe, develop self-confidence and are motivated to learn. One parent commented that the school is helping her children to develop into 'well balanced young people with good values and respect for others and diversity within our community.' Students say that they enjoy school, particularly the very good relationships that they have with their teachers, which create a very good climate for learning.

The quality of teaching and learning is good with some examples of outstanding practice observed during the inspection. However, in some lessons where tasks and strategies are not well matched to the needs of the learners, some students make less rapid progress. Additional learning opportunities such as breakfast study clubs and one-to-one mentoring sessions combine to assist students in making outstanding progress in Key Stage 4. An improved curriculum is built on strong and effective links to external partnerships with partner schools and businesses. The school raises aspirations and enables learners to achieve highly; consequently, progress to further education and employment is very good. Care, guidance and support are outstanding. Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is excellent.

Leadership and management are outstanding. Senior leaders have a good understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Under the effective leadership of the headteacher, the issues raised at the last inspection have been tackled successfully. Recently introduced self-review systems are designed to ensure a sharper focus on outcomes. Middle managers and senior leaders provide good support to the headteacher. Governance is good and committed to developing improvement in standards. There is a good and strengthening capacity to improve.

What the school should do to improve further

- Increase the proportion of outstanding teaching by matching teaching more closely to all learners' needs.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Standards are good and progress is outstanding. On entry to the school, standards are broadly average. In 2008, the unvalidated school data show that over three quarters of students attained 5 A* to C at GCSE, which is well above the national average. This represents significant improvement year-on-year. There has also been a consistent increase in the number of learners achieving 5 A* to C grades, including English and mathematics. Unvalidated school data for 2008 indicate that 58% of learners achieved 5 A* to C including English and mathematics which is well above average. This indicates outstanding achievement, particularly at Key Stage 4. All learners taking music, BTEC sport and BTEC business achieved grades A* to C. There was a decline in the percentage of students achieving A* to C in science in 2008, but strategies are in place to ensure that this is addressed. The increased curricular opportunities provided by the specialist status have improved standards by offering a wider range of learning experiences

matched closely to students' needs. Standards at Key Stage 3 are above the national average and learners achieve well above the national average in mathematics. Fewer students in Year 9 achieve the higher Level 6 in English and the school is implementing strategies to tackle this. There are no significant differences between groups of students and many with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make exceptional progress.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Students' personal development and well-being are outstanding. Behaviour around the school and in those lessons where students' interest is engaged fully, is exemplary. Students say that they feel safe in school and that their opinions are valued. For example, the school council is successful in instigating changes and some members of the school council attend governors' meetings and participate in senior staff appointments. Students develop increasingly mature attitudes and a sense of responsibility. Almost all adopt healthy lifestyles, aided by the healthy food options available and by the extensive sporting and exercise opportunities. The Active Girls' programme has been successful in increasing girls' involvement with sport and outdoor activities and the girls have taken responsibility for developing this further. Students' social, moral, spiritual and cultural development is outstanding. In lessons, students often work collaboratively and have excellent opportunities to express and discuss their opinions and feelings. Their experience of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity and their understanding of human rights are developed effectively in personal, social and health education (PSHE) and through assemblies, enrichment activities and links with schools in South Africa and Malaga. Their contribution to the school and wider community is outstanding. Students take on responsibilities, for example, as delegates for a wide variety of key areas such as ecological awareness and some volunteer to be peer mentors. They also work with partner primary schools as sports leaders. Students are well prepared for their future lives as they develop very good literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) skills and have an excellent understanding of business and enterprise. They enjoy coming to school as indicated in their above average attendance. However, this is not as high as it could be because some families take holidays during term time.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

The quality of teaching and learning is good and improving. Indeed, some is already outstanding. Teaching has a clear focus on a range of tasks, which engage and sustain students' interest and attention, leading to good and outstanding progress in lessons. Improved assessment procedures are beginning to play a major role in helping younger students to know how well they are doing by giving them clear information about what they need to do to improve. Students have opportunities to assess their own and each other's work. They respond to this maturely and responsibly and the quality and perceptive comments in the feedback enables their peers to improve their work. In one lesson, exciting vocabulary developed in a peer assessment session enlivened descriptive writing. Teachers' good questioning skills challenge students' thinking and support them in articulating their growing understanding of concepts. Teachers provide focused guidance on how to improve their work through high quality assessment and marking, particularly at Key Stage 4. This and the unstinting individual support given particularly by staff before and after school helps older students to make outstanding

progress. The proficient use of ICT enhances their independent learning at school and at home. Where teaching is consistently outstanding, there is a close match of tasks and strategies to students' individual needs. Sometimes, students' engagement and progress is limited because the pace of lessons or tasks are not sufficiently well matched to their individual needs.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The curriculum is outstanding and contributes significantly to students making very good progress both academically and in their personal development. It is well suited to their needs and prepares them well for the future. The Business and Applied Learning status has extended opportunities for students to study catering, BTEC business, BTEC construction, BTEC sport and performing arts, which help raise the aspirations for the students. Partnerships with universities, banks and businesses extend students' horizons and help raise their self-esteem, with the majority moving successfully to college, other training courses or employment. Many with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make very good progress, because of the support to improve their literacy and numeracy and to raise their aspirations. They take part fully in the range of opportunities available. The school plays a key role in the locality in developing links to ensure that students are able to access courses in business, administration and finance. Students describe with enthusiasm the range of sporting and other extra-curricular activities on offer. There are many opportunities for them to participate in collaborative, paired and team activities contributing to their exemplary social and moral development. The positive partnerships between students and staff in all aspects of school life, support healthy and safe choices and lead to a high level of enjoyment in school life and a pleasure in achieving well.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

The care, guidance and support for students are outstanding. All staff are committed to ensuring that students enjoy and achieve well in a safe learning environment. There is a sharp focus upon them becoming independent, for example, the use of the student planner encourages them to manage their time effectively and take responsibility for their own learning. They take responsibility for their actions at unstructured times and good supervision ensures their safety around the school. Any incidents of bullying or disruptive behaviour are dealt with effectively and students have opportunities to become peer mentors to support others. There is a high level of academic and pastoral guidance. Safeguarding arrangements are fully in place and meet statutory requirements. All staff are kept up to date with child protection procedures to ensure students' safety. Challenging targets are set and progress against these is monitored carefully to identify any underachievement, particularly at Key Stage 4. Parents and carers are kept fully informed about their children's current attainment and progress, enabling them to support their children. In some subjects such as, BTEC business, parents can access information about their children's progress using ICT systems. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those with additional needs receive effective support and this enables many to make exceptional progress. The school works effectively in partnership with other agencies to ensure that students in danger of becoming disaffected are re-engaged.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Leadership and management are outstanding. The leadership of the headteacher resolutely sets clear direction for the school. She is supported effectively by the senior leadership team, who share the same vision where achievement and standards of all students are paramount. Challenging targets are set for all students. As a result of accurate tracking and monitoring, students make exceptional progress so that many exceed these challenging targets. Robust school self-evaluation systems have enabled a comprehensive and collaborative view of what different departments do well and what they might need to develop. They have helped the school to tackle the issues raised at the last inspection and the school has recognised the need to refine them to ensure that clear and focused actions ensue. Recently introduced self-review systems are designed to enable the school to agree a sharper focus to tackle issues, for example, the lower percentage of students achieving higher Level 6 in English in Year 9. The promotion of equal opportunities is outstanding. For example, students speak highly of how the school encourages them to partake in all aspects of school life, including out of school activities. Provision for those students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is outstanding. Community cohesion is a strength of the school. The comprehensive PSHE programme encourages students to understand about diversity in Britain and international links enable them to learn about the global community. For example, they accompanied school staff on a visit to South Africa to set up links with a school. There are very good partnerships with local schools and students have broadened their understanding of different communities through learning walks in other schools. Links with the local community are outstanding because there are regular activities and events throughout the week involving local residents. Students contribute by carol singing and visiting local homes for the elderly, for example. The school's fund-raising initiatives have proved very effective in promoting additional building at the school. Governors provide good support and challenge to the work of the school. They are actively involved in school life and have a good understanding of its strengths and areas for improvement. There is a good and strengthening capacity to improve.

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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?	1
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?	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	1

¹Grade 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.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1
The attendance of learners	2
The behaviour of learners	1
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	1
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	1
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1
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

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

Inspection of Birchwood Community High School, Warrington WA3 7PT

Thank you for welcoming us to your school. My colleagues and I very much enjoyed meeting you during the inspection. You were very welcoming, polite and your behaviour was excellent. We would particularly like to thank those of you who spoke to us.

We judged your school to be outstanding. This does not happen very often in school inspections and all students and members of staff should be very proud of this achievement. This is what we found.

- The majority of you are making excellent progress.
- Birchwood is well led and managed by all the people who make decisions about you.
- There are excellent relationships between you and the school staff.
- You take pride in your school.
- The school provides an outstanding curriculum and an excellent range of extra-curricular activities.
- Everyone in school cares for you very well so that the care, guidance and support you receive are outstanding and you feel safe.
- The way you are taught is good and the way you learn is getting better.

We have asked the school to make sure that:

- all of you experience more of the lessons where teaching and learning is outstanding.

You can help your school by maintaining your excellent behaviour and your good attendance. Once again, thank you for being so friendly, articulate and helpful during our visit.