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26 September 2014

Ms Janet Hetherington
Senior Vice-Principal
Birches Head School
Birches Head Road
Hanley
Stoke-on-Trent
ST2 8DD

Dear Ms Hetherington

Special measures monitoring inspection of Birches Head School

Following my visit with, Henry Moreton, Additional Inspector, to your school on 24 and 25 September 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in December 2013. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time: the school is not making enough progress towards the removal of special measures.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection only in consultation with me.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of People Services for Stoke-On-Trent.

Yours sincerely

James McNeillie

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in December 2013

- Improve teaching to at least a good quality so that standards in all subjects, especially in English and mathematics, rise significantly by:
 - eradicating inadequate teaching through rigorous monitoring and taking prompt action
 - raising teachers' expectations of what all students can achieve so that students are motivated, interested and develop better attitudes to learning
 - improving teachers' questioning so that students are challenged to think more deeply
 - improving the quality and impact of marking so that helpful advice is offered and higher expectations are set for the quantity and quality of work in students' books.

- Improve the management of behaviour in lessons by:
 - ensuring systems for rewarding good behaviour are effective and all teachers follow agreed procedures for managing behaviour in lessons
 - ensuring all teachers deal effectively with low-level disruption.

- Improve literacy and numeracy across all subjects by:
 - ensuring all teachers take full responsibility for the teaching of literacy and numeracy skills within their lessons
 - ensuring that students respond to requests in their books for work to be corrected, improved or re-written
 - developing better questioning and discussion in class so that students get more opportunities to develop their vocabulary and speaking skills
 - fostering the pleasures of reading across the school
 - ensuring there are enough opportunities for extended writing in all subjects
 - implementing an agreed numeracy policy so that all teachers plan for numeracy development whenever appropriate in their lessons.

- Urgently strengthen the effectiveness of leadership, management and governance by:
 - ensuring senior leaders rigorously tackle key weaknesses in the quality of teaching and learning and decisively attend to the way in which behaviour is managed
 - focusing lesson observations on what the students are learning, rather than on what the teacher is doing
 - developing the skills of subject and department leaders to enable them to take a more active role in raising achievement
 - ensuring the governing body holds leaders more closely to account for improving the quality of teaching and achievement
 - undertaking an external review of governance in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved

- conducting an external review of the school's use of the pupil premium spending.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 24 and 25 September 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with you and other senior leaders, a group of students, the Chair of the Governing Body and two other members, three representatives from the local authority and the recently appointed interim headteacher. This visit did not focus explicitly on how well students are developing their numeracy skills.

Context

The headteacher resigned on 15 September 2014. Between then and the first day of this inspection you have been leading the school as senior vice-principal. The local authority has made arrangements for the headteacher of a local outstanding school to take over the leadership of the school with immediate effect. This headteacher will have overall responsibility and will spend at least two days each week at Birches Head. The local authority has also commissioned an experienced former headteacher to spend at least three days each week at the school. The school is advertising for a substantive subject leader for English. An assistant vice-principal is leading the department in the interim period.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The provisional 2014 results show that the proportion of students achieving five GCSE qualifications, including English and mathematics, at grades A* to C, is woefully below the national average for a second consecutive year. A rise of 5% on this measure from the 2013 results is just not good enough and signals the far too slow pace of improvement in the school. A significant reason for these weak overall results is that only 32% of students achieved a grade A* to C for GCSE English: this is a negligible rise from the previous year. Only 40% of the previous Year 11 students made the progress they should have done. Students' achievement in mathematics improved compared to the 2013 results with a 10% rise in the proportion attaining GCSE grades A* to C and a 9% rise in the proportion making expected progress. However, even with some improvements, this is still nowhere near good enough. There was some narrowing of gaps between students supported by the pupil premium funding and their classmates but this was not consistent and these students' achievement continued to be inadequate.

In other subjects there were some notable improvements; for example, a 50% rise in the number gaining A* to C grades in core science, a 20% rise in history and an 18% rise in geography. Conversely, only 11% of students achieved a grade C or above in GCSE product design, 18% achieved this measure in French and only 24% in religious studies.

There is significant concern about the reliability of teachers' assessments in a number of subjects and tackling this is a crucial next step for school leaders. There were some wide differences between what students achieved and what had been predicted. Leaders had predicted that 21% more students would gain a GCSE grade C or above in English than actually did, with a discrepancy of 20% for French and 15% for information and communication technology.

The achievement of students currently in the school continues to be a serious cause for concern, particularly for those in Year 11. While a year-on-year comparison shows that this year group is achieving slightly better than the group of students who left in summer 2014, all groups of students are underachieving. For example, the data from the mathematics team, which has been reliable in the past, indicate that no student who has special educational needs, and does not have a statement for these needs, is on track to make at least nationally expected progress. However, in Years 8 to 10 there is some evidence that students are beginning to make quicker progress than has been the case in the past. The school's records show that gaps between students supported by the pupil premium funding and their classmates are narrowing, and on some occasions this group of students are doing better than their peers. In most subjects, middle-ability and more able students are making the slowest progress.

There continue to be considerable weaknesses in the levels of students' literacy skills and how well they use the skills they do have in a range of subjects. This is true for students of all ability levels, including the most able in Year 11. Too many students are making very basic errors in spelling, for example, incorrectly spelling common and key words. Students also often fail to write in complete sentences or use capital letters correctly. These and other weaknesses are significant barriers to the quality of students' learning.

The quality of teaching

There remains too much teaching that is having an inadequate impact or requires improvement. However, the school's records and inspectors' evidence show that there is an increasing amount of teaching that is having a good impact on students' learning.

Weak teaching continues to be characterised by many of the aspects identified at the time of the section 5 inspection. Too many teachers do not have high enough expectations of what students can achieve or what needs to be achieved. Therefore, they do not plan lessons that challenge and support students of different abilities. The school's data show that middle-ability and more able students make particularly slow progress but too few teachers take this into account when they plan lessons. Plans for teacher training are rightly being adapted to concentrate on tackling these weaknesses. Other examples of low expectations include when teachers do not insist

that students listen to instructions or explanations that are given. Students' weak literacy skills are not being addressed consistently by teachers either in terms of resources and strategies to help students or in terms of identifying errors in students' written work through marking. Leaders have recently provided staff with further training on these aspects but the impact is not yet evident. A further barrier to learning is the attitudes of many students. Not enough of them are excited or even interested in what they are learning and so often passively resist contributing to lessons or completing work. There is a direct link here with students having experienced too much teaching that is uninspiring.

There are some pockets of strong teaching that is really making a difference to students' enjoyment of school and the development of their knowledge, skills and understanding. The students we spoke to described improvements to teaching in mathematics and in other subjects. One student astutely linked these improvements to having fewer supply teachers and instead having teachers that can get to know what students need, are enthusiastic and have high expectations of behaviour. I observed a good level of challenge in a Year 11 English lesson where the teacher insisted that students went beyond very basic responses to the analysis of a poem. One student complained that, 'Miss won't tell us what to write down,' but he also understood that this was because he had to think of the answer for himself. In a Year 7 science lesson, the teacher had planned a well-structured lesson about the importance of bees that allowed students to understand what and how they had to learn and had a good focus on helping students with developing their reading skills. Inspectors also observed some teachers using a good range of questions and this can be linked to the impact of recent training for teachers.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

There continues to be inadequate behaviour that stops learning. Poor behaviour was observed in lessons during the inspection and both staff and students describe that behaviour and attitudes to learning are too variable. In some lessons, students persistently talked over the teacher, did not listen to instructions and did not engage in any way with the activities set. Too often, teachers did not address these issues well enough. Some students commented that behaviour in the 'Ebacc' groups is generally good but that was not always the case for other classes. A number of students commented that behaviour in lessons depends on which teacher they have.

However, the school's records show that, like in other aspects, there are beginning to be improvements. For example, there are a decreasing number of incidents when senior leaders are called to sort out problems in classrooms. There have also been fewer students excluded from school in the last weeks of the summer term and the first weeks of this term than was the case in previous terms. Attendance rates have also increased and are above the national averages.

Inspectors also observed some good and better behaviour in lessons and some very good behaviour management by teachers. In both Year 8 physical education lessons observed, students listened carefully to the teacher and were active in developing their understanding and skills of handball and football. Year 7 students in their first weeks in the school were being set high expectations of their behaviour and responding well to these in a geography lesson, for example, by not shouting out and making sure they had the right equipment. In a Year 9 art lesson, the teacher calmly and firmly made sure that all the students were listening to her explanations and used the good relationship she had with the students to keep particular individuals on track. Each of these teachers were good role models for the mutual respect and high expectations of engagement in learning that are necessary for behaviour to improve in the school.

Pupils' movement around the school site was relatively calm, particularly on the stairs. At times, students are not fully aware of those around them which means there is some jostling in corridors and inappropriate language used. Despite this, all of the students we spoke to described feeling safe in school. Year 7 students felt welcomed and were helped to make friends and older students explained how staff had helped them to overcome difficulties.

Leaders have introduced more opportunities for students to be rewarded for good work, for example each subject department has a 'Star of the Week' and teachers give 'Wowchers' to students that allow them some extra privileges. I will explore in more detail on my next visit how much these developments are helping to promote good behaviour.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The quality of leadership is determined by its impact. There have been improvements to aspects of the school's work and increasing consistency in the work of teachers and leaders. However, these improvements have been too slow, as shown in students' achievement and the continued weaknesses in the quality of teaching and students' behaviour. The school was judged to require special measures almost 10 months ago.

The current instability in leadership is also a considerable potential barrier to the school's improvement. At the time of this inspection, the interim leadership arrangements had just been put in place and the details of what will happen next and of leaders' roles and responsibilities have yet to be clarified. There is also no substantive subject leader for English which means that the senior leader covering this responsibility has to do so in tandem with her whole-school responsibility of developing students' literacy skills. Inspection evidence identifies that there continues to be a desperate need to improve students' skills in these aspects. In addition, there are also concerns about the effectiveness of other aspects of the leadership of subjects.

Leaders now make judgements on the quality of teaching on a much wider range of evidence than just observations of lessons. This means that, on the whole, their ability to self-evaluate the effectiveness of the school's work is more accurate. Joint observations between inspectors and senior leaders provided good evidence that these leaders are able to identify the key strengths of teaching and the barriers to students' learning. There is frequent checking of teaching and students' achievement, with some clear examples, such as in the use of questioning, where teacher training has led to improvements. However, these improvements are not happening quickly enough. There are now more subject leaders whose leadership skills have been developed and this means there are signs of improvement in their areas of responsibility. Senior leaders have been decisive in tackling poor performance of teachers and other leaders, providing support where necessary and taking decisive action when improvements are not happening. Leaders have a good awareness of patterns of students' behaviour and this information now needs to have a more demonstrable impact.

Governors have worked well and quickly with the local authority to establish the interim arrangements for the senior leadership of the school. They have a greater first-hand knowledge of the work of the school through their 'guardian' roles that link them with specific teachers and leaders. They have begun to act on the recommendations of the external reviews that took place after the section 5 inspection. Governors are increasing their ability to ask pertinent questions of the information that other leaders provide for them, and are robustly challenging the accuracy of that data given the concerns raised above. However, like other senior leaders they have not ensured that the pace of improvement is quick enough.

External support

Local authority officers were quick to establish interim leadership arrangements following the resignation of the previous headteacher and have committed to these arrangements until such time that the school becomes an academy. These officers are in the process of establishing a contract with the interim leaders to make sure that there are clear expectations of what these leaders need to do and that there are measurable success criteria against which their impact can be measured. Some school staff commented that the local authority could have been more proactively visible in the week between the resignation of the previous headteacher and this inspection. Senior officers have committed to ensuring that these concerns are addressed and to making sure that the roles and responsibilities of the current senior leaders are clarified quickly within the structure of the interim leadership arrangements.

The local authority has carefully monitored the progress of the school since my last visit and continued to provide funding for the school to access support from other providers. There has been some impact of this support in terms of improvements to

specific teachers and leaders. However, senior leaders report that some of this work was slow to get started.