

Birches Head High School

Birches Head Road, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, ST2 8DD

Inspection dates 10–11 December 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	Inadequate	4
Achievement of pupils		Inadequate	4
Quality of teaching		Inadequate	4
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Inadequate	4
Leadership and management		Inadequate	4

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires special measures.

- Achievement has declined significantly since the previous inspection.
- Students underachieve in English and mathematics. Attainment and progress in mathematics has been particularly weak over the last three years.
- Many students underachieve in a range of other subjects, such as science, information and communication technology, geography, history and physical education.
- Teachers' low expectations of students together with their weak lesson planning lead to students' inadequate progress and achievement.
- Work in students' books is often incomplete. Few take pride in their work. Teachers provide too little advice on how students can improve and students rarely respond when they do.
- The promotion of literacy and numeracy across the school is inadequate. The speaking and listening skills of a significant number of students are particularly weak.
- Inadequate behaviour hampers students' learning and progress. Behaviour worsens when students are bored. The management of behaviour is inconsistent across the school.
- Senior leaders and governors have not had a clear enough view of the quality of teaching and learning. Initiatives to improve teaching and behaviour have not been checked effectively.
- Subject leaders have had little impact in securing improvements across their departments.
- Governors have not held the school sufficiently to account for the poor progress of many students, including those receiving pupil premium funding.

The school has the following strengths

- Most students say they feel safe in school and that they are free from bullying.
- Attendance is improving. The number of exclusions has fallen significantly.
- The school takes good care of students and offers good support for students whose circumstance makes them vulnerable.

Information about this inspection

- Four inspectors observed 35 lessons taught by 35 teachers. Five of these were joint observations with school leaders.
- Meetings were held with senior leaders, members of staff, groups of students, members of the governing body and two representatives of the local authority.
- Inspectors scrutinised assessment data, self-evaluation information, procedures for the management of teachers' performance, school improvement plans, the work in students' books and policies and procedures for the safeguarding of students.
- Inspectors took account of the 14 responses to Parent View, the on-line questionnaire, and the results of recent school surveys of parents' views.
- Inspectors gained the views of members of staff from discussions and the 53 responses to the staff questionnaire.

Inspection team

Judith Straw, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Janet Peckett	Additional Inspector
David Woodhouse	Additional Inspector
John Leigh	Additional Inspector

Full report

In accordance with section 44 of the Education Act 2005 (as amended),, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school.

Information about this school

- This is a smaller than average sized secondary school.
- There is an average proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds
- The proportion of students who speak English as an additional language is average.
- The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is above average. The proportion supported through school action is average.
- A well above average proportion of students is eligible for support through the pupil premium, which is additional funding for those students who are known to be eligible for free school meals, children from service families and those children who are looked after by the local authority.
- A very small number of students follow vocational courses at Stoke on Trent College.
- The school does not meet the government's current floor standard which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- 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 in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved

Ofsted will make recommendations on governance to the authority responsible for the school.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils

is inadequate

- Standards are too low. In 2013, the proportion of students gaining five or more GCSE passes at grade C or above, including English and mathematics was well below average and a steep drop from the previous year. While standards had been rising slowly over time, standards attained in 2013 by Year 11 were the lowest for four years. This represents inadequate achievement from the students' individual starting points.
- Students start school in Year 7 with standards of attainment that are well below average. Many arrive with literacy and numeracy skills that are poorly developed for their age. Insufficient emphasis is placed on developing students' literacy to help them make fast enough progress in all subjects. Students are not used to writing at length. There is little evidence to show that mathematics skills are practised or applied as they should be in other subjects.
- Students' progress in English dropped significantly in 2013. Progress in mathematics, although showing slight improvement over time has consistently fallen short of national expectations. Standards in both English and mathematics have been affected by staffing instability. Students have been entered early for GCSE mathematics but this has had little impact on raising standards because teaching is weak. Early entry has not resulted in more students gaining higher grades or in significantly improving the pass rate.
- GCSE results in 2013 show that standards were low in all subjects across the school, except in art and design where they were average. Few students achieve A* or A grades because teaching is not sufficiently challenging to support the progress of the most able students.
- Assessment information and analysis undertaken by school leaders show that boys and middle ability students make the least progress. The current school action plan requires teachers to focus on these groups in particular, but it is too soon to measure the impact on their progress.
- Students who are supported through the pupil premium funding, predominantly those known to be eligible for free school meals, make even less progress than their peers in English and mathematics, and are one GCSE grade behind in both subjects.
- Disabled students and those who have special educational needs sometimes make better progress from their starting points than other students because they receive precision teaching through intervention classes and good support in class. Many of these students make better progress over time than others. Students for whom English is an additional language also make better progress than many others because their attitudes to learning are more positive. The achievement of these few students while not inadequate still requires improvement.
- The students who attend a college course for one day each week are usually successful in the vocational courses they follow. Their attendance and progress are checked by school leaders and staff at the college.

The quality of teaching

is inadequate

- The quality of teaching is too variable. Observation in lessons and the work in students' books show that the too much teaching either requires improvement or is inadequate. As a consequence, students make too little progress in narrowing the gap between their low starting points and the standards expected by the end of Year 11.
- Where teaching is ineffective the work set for students is too easy for the most able students and fails to challenge them, while other students struggle to complete the work successfully.
- Teachers do not pay enough attention to the progress students make in lessons and do not adapt their lessons in response to whether students find the task too hard or too easy.
- Too often lessons are designed to keep students busy with tasks rather than to develop their knowledge, understanding and skills. Some teachers tolerate low-level disruption with the result that the progress of all students is hampered by the lack of attention of a few.

- Teachers' questioning is too basic, sometimes allowing students to respond with only one-word answers. Some teachers do not allow thinking or discussion time for the students to develop, expand and explain their ideas.
- Expectations of what students can achieve are not high enough. Teachers do not challenge the apathetic attitude of some students and their lack of pride in their work. Opportunities are missed to celebrate good work. There are few examples of students' work displayed in classrooms or around the school.
- The school has recognised that low levels of literacy are a barrier to learning and is in the process of developing a new literacy and numeracy policy. Too few teachers are taking responsibility for the development of literacy across their subjects. Some pupil premium funding is being used to provide courses in reading and grammar. Several initiatives to improve literacy have been introduced but the impact is not yet evident in students' work.
- The teaching of mathematics has been hampered by many changes in staff. As a consequence, the school has not yet developed an effective numeracy policy.
- There is some good, and even outstanding, teaching in the school. For example, good teaching was seen in individual lessons in maths, English, geography, history, French, physical education, food technology and science where the pace of learning was rapid so that students made good progress. Unfortunately, this good teaching is not always evident across entire departments.
- Teaching assistants generally enable disabled students and those who have special educational needs or who are new to learning English to make better progress from their starting points than other students. The support for students new to learning English is good so that these students make expected progress.
- Marking varies from good practice in some books to others where errors are ignored and not enough advice is given to help students improve. An examination of a range of books showed that some have large gaps where students have put headings but there is no record of the learning. Students rarely respond to teacher's comments, correct errors or complete work. Some students show little pride in their work.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are inadequate

- In too many lessons, students engage in low-level disruption when they do not listen properly or talk among themselves; this hampers their learning and that of other students.
- In some lessons, students are unwilling to contribute. They display a lack of interest in, and engagement with learning. Some students take little pride in the presentation of work in their books. A significant number of students are apathetic about their learning and lack the ambition to improve.
- Behaviour around the school between lessons and at breaks and lunch times is usually acceptable but can become boisterous.
- The school has benefited from new building work in several areas. Students are usually respectful of their surroundings so that most classrooms and public areas are clean and smart. Nearly all students wear the correct uniform. Students are only allowed to use mobile phones in designated areas but some students consistently ignore this rule.
- The school has a new behaviour policy which was introduced in September 2013. Not all staff consistently apply this policy which reduces its effectiveness. The majority of staff who returned the questionnaire indicated that they feel behaviour is poor.
- The school works hard to support students who might be at risk of exclusion. The alternative provision provided by school is successful in keeping these students in education but their progress is minimal. Most students go on to some kind of further education course after leaving school.
- Well-trained pastoral staff provide emotional and social support for students whose circumstances make them vulnerable and work effectively with other agencies.
- Most students report that they generally feel safe in school. They demonstrate a good understanding of different forms of bullying, such as racist or homophobic bullying and say that

it is usually dealt with effectively by the school's anti-bullying team.

- Students say that they understand how to keep safe and are aware of the dangers of drugs, alcohol and the issues around internet safety and social media. A majority of parents indicated that they believe their children are safe in school.
- Attendance is rising, although it remains below average. The proportion of students who are persistently absent has dropped significantly as a result of the school's efforts.

The leadership and management are inadequate

- Despite some actions taken to improve teaching, leaders have failed to eradicate inadequate teaching. Improvements in the past have not been secure, rapid or sustained enough to sufficiently raise students' low levels of attainment.
- Senior leaders and some heads of department have worked hard and tried their best but they have been too generous in their assessments of the quality of teaching. With the exception of the headteacher, observations have focused too much on what the teacher is doing and not sufficiently concentrated on the progress of students in lessons.
- The leadership team has previously succeeded in some small improvements in GCSE results, but results in 2013 declined sharply and were far too low. Attainment and progress in mathematics is a particular weakness and have remained significantly below national figures for the past three years with little sign of improvement.
- Initiatives to improve teaching and behaviour have been introduced. However, after an initial improvement the procedures were not followed through, inconsistencies were allowed to creep in and hence no long-term improvement is discernible. A raising achievement plan is in place, but currently this is having little impact because not all staff follow all agreed procedures and students' behaviour is not managed consistently. Monitoring has not been sufficiently rigorous in ensuring that all staff apply the same rewards and sanctions.
- Some subject and department leaders lack the necessary skills to contribute to overall school improvement. They have been entirely focused on trying to improve standards in their own areas with limited success. The performance management of staff is undertaken by the headteacher with rigour and salary progression is closely linked to success in the classroom. Teachers' performance is checked against the Teachers' Standards.
- The curriculum offers a range of options to suit the different abilities of students. Leaders know that poor literacy skills are a major barrier to success. They have recently introduced better training for staff and individual reading support with specialist teaching assistants for students of middle ability in Years 10 and 11. It is, however, too soon to judge the impact of these initiatives.
- The school offers a good range of clubs after school including sport, drama and dance. The casual attitude of many students to learning and to broadening their horizons shows that the curriculum is not effective in promoting students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Students have little understanding of other cultures or the arts.
- While the school tackles discrimination successfully, inadequate achievement overall, and the gaps between the progress of different groups of students, mean that it is not able to ensure equality of opportunity for all students.
- Safeguarding systems are robust and effective.
- The school works hard to keep parents informed about their children's progress and the few responses to Parent View showed that most were satisfied with the school's work. A more positive response was evident from the school's own questionnaires distributed at parent consultation evenings.
- The local authority has identified the school as one which needs considerable support and some of this work has begun. There are plans to link the school with one which has a sustained track record of success.
- The school should not appoint newly qualified teachers.

■ The governance of the school:

- The governing body is aware of the need to hold the school to account but has not been sufficiently challenging in asking searching questions about the quality of teaching, the progress made by students and the low standards achieved. Governors are informed about the achievement of different groups of students and the success or otherwise of different departments. They are linked with different departments, meet with subject leaders and receive reports on the work of departments. However, they have not challenged the school with sufficient rigour and have too easily accepted reports rather than requiring further explanation as to why standards are so low and what is being done to rectify matters. Governors ensure that all safeguarding requirements are met and fulfil their statutory duties adequately. Governors are informed about the performance management of staff and how pupil premium funding is used. The recent analysis of the impact of pupil premium funding of students' achievement shows that it is producing only modest improvements and that the achievement of these students is inadequate.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	124390
Local authority	Stoke-On-Trent
Inspection number	429997

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 of pupils on the school roll	719
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Barbara Miller
Headteacher	Karen Healey
Date of previous school inspection	25 May 2011
Telephone number	01782 233595
Fax number	01782 236647
Email address	info@bircheshead.org.uk

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