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8 October 2012

Mr Phil Fitzpatrick
Executive Headteacher
Birkdale High School
A Specialist Academy for History, Mathematics and Computing
Windy Harbour Road
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Dear Mr Fitzpatrick

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Birkdale High School

Following my visit with Sue Harrison, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 3 and 4 October 2012, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in December 2011. 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 and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – good

Progress since the previous monitoring inspection – good

Newly Qualified Teachers may be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State and the Chair of the Governing Body.

Yours sincerely

Sara Morrissey
Her Majesty's Inspector

January 2012



Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in December 2011

- Accelerate progress in learning to that which is good for all groups of students by:
 - ensuring that suitably challenging targets are used consistently to plan learning opportunities
 - creating robust systems for tracking students' progress in order to identify underperformance early and introduce appropriate learning support.

- Improve the quality of teaching and use of assessment information so that they are consistently good by:
 - sharing good practice
 - establishing the effective use of assessment to support learning, including the use of targets and feedback through marking
 - creating more opportunities for effective independent learning
 - ensuring that students of all abilities receive suitable learning support and challenge so that they are able to make at least good progress.

- Plan and implement an effective system of self-evaluation by:
 - creating a cycle of monitoring, evaluation and review
 - ensuring that staff receive accurate and pertinent feedback from lesson observations which will highlight strengths and areas for improvement
 - involving the governing body directly in robust monitoring and evaluation of the school improvement plan.

- Improve behaviour to be at least satisfactory by:
 - ensuring that high expectations are consistently applied in lessons and around the school.

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Birkdale High School

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 3 and 4 October 2012

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, other nominated staff, groups of students and representatives of the governing body. Lesson observations were also conducted jointly with four members of the senior leadership team.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, one deputy headteacher has left the school. Staffing has stabilised following the appointment of a number of staff, including the appointment of two newly qualified teachers.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

Results of examinations taken by Year 11 students, in summer 2012, indicate that prior underachievement is being tackled rigorously and standards of attainment are beginning to rise. The proportion of students gaining five GCSE passes at A* to C rose, as did the percentage gaining the highest grades, A* and A. In particular, GCSE results in mathematics showed significant improvement and reflect students' true potential more accurately. Targeted support in some subject areas including French, history and art also resulted in much improved outcomes. While these improvements are encouraging, leaders acknowledge that there is still work to be done to ensure that all students achieve as well as they should.

Systems to set targets and track progress have been simplified and provide a clear overview of students' performance. Data reveal that variations persist in the progress made by different groups of students. For example, by the end of Key Stage 3, evidence suggests that high-attaining boys are performing as well as should be expected given their starting points. However, low-attaining students and those with a special educational need make less progress over time so that gaps are not closing quickly enough to raise their achievement. This is because planned activities are not tailored consistently to meet the specific learning needs of different students. Furthermore, the progress made by a small number of students who are at the early stages of learning English as an additional language is limited at times because they cannot access their learning.

In lessons, the pace of learning is accelerating. This is because there are more opportunities for students to participate actively in tasks that are both engaging and challenging. For example, in a Year 8 technology lesson, boys were engrossed in an extended practical activity and made excellent progress because they understood what was required of them and took responsibility for using equipment very effectively to realise their personal learning

goals. However, learning is more variable where teachers over-direct activities and there is insufficient challenge to extend students' understanding. Leaders have identified the need to accelerate the progress made by low-attaining students and are taking steps to accelerate their progress. For example, the deployment of teaching assistants has been reviewed in order to increase their contribution to students' learning.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- accelerate progress in learning to that which is good for all groups of students – satisfactory

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching has improved; the proportion of good and outstanding teaching has increased and inadequate teaching is rare. This is as a result of a comprehensive programme of lesson observations, involving all staff, that has informed continuing professional development and ensured that senior leaders have an accurate overview of strengths and weaknesses in provision. Staff report that they feel empowered to take greater risks in their teaching and have benefited from the routine sharing of good practice through peer observations. Coaching provided by subject leaders is having a positive impact on improving specific aspects of teaching that require improvement. The learning and teaching group has also played a significant role in developing new policies to raise expectations of teachers further, for example, in marking students' work. Consequently, the quality of feedback provided is improving and, in the best lessons, time is allocated effectively for students to respond to teachers' comments and guidance.

The most effective teaching is characterised by good subject knowledge and an enthusiastic delivery that engages students in varied activities that are sequenced well to meet learning objectives. Students enjoy choosing tasks that offer them the right level of challenge. For example, in a Year 10 mathematics lesson, lower-ability students selected activities to test their recall and understanding of angle facts. As a result of skilful questioning and guidance by the teacher, they grew in confidence to move independently onto more challenging tasks. Students value the opportunity for peer assessment and report that they find this helpful in improving the quality of their work. However, at times, progress checks are not used as well as they might be to share the strengths in students' work and points for improvement. Very occasionally, peer assessment is too frequent and this limits time for students to extend and deepen their responses. Teaching is less effective where assessment information is not used precisely to match tasks to students' individual needs. Occasionally, lessons proceed at such a brisk pace that there is insufficient time for students to consolidate or reflect on what they are learning.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- improve the quality of teaching and use of assessment information so that they are consistently good – good

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students continue to attend regularly and their behaviour in lessons and around the academy has improved. During the inspection, students' behaviour and attitudes to learning were never less than satisfactory and often good. This is because behaviour management strategies have been clarified and are understood by all. High expectations of behaviour for learning are applied consistently so that lessons are rarely disrupted. Regular visits to lessons by senior and middle leaders help to reinforce expectations for learning and provide support and encouragement for targeted students. The appointment of additional heads of year and deputy heads of year has contributed to a better understanding of the factors that affect students' behaviour and attitudes to learning. For example, detailed analyses of behavioural incidents are enabling staff to respond to students' individual needs more effectively.

Leaders have responded to an increase in the number of students with additional learning needs by developing transition arrangements with primary feeder schools and strengthening links with parents and carers. A new centre within the academy has also been opened to provide tailored support and extend the achievement of students with special educational needs. However, it is too early to measure the impact of these strategies on students' outcomes.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- improve behaviour to be at least satisfactory – good

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

Under the transformational leadership provided by the executive headteacher, leaders at all levels are developing the skills to drive improvement at a quicker pace. Staff report that they feel empowered by the changes in systems and structures and morale is high. Consequently, good progress has been made since the last monitoring inspection in improving the quality of teaching and implementing strategies to promote good behaviour and positive attitudes to learning.

The roles and responsibilities of senior and middle leaders have been re-structured and lines of accountability made clear. Middle leaders' skills are improving because time has been allocated to enable them to monitor and evaluate the impact of teaching on students' performance in their subject area. While some variation persists in the quality of middle leadership, their contribution to improving the quality of teaching has increased.

Improvement planning has been revised and is supported by robust and accurate systems to monitor and evaluate the impact of actions taken to meet measurable success criteria. Interim checks of progress ensure that challenging but realistic objectives are met in the short and medium term. Senior leaders have an accurate view of where further improvement is required and acknowledge that it is too soon to demonstrate the impact of

some actions taken to ensure that all students achieve as well as they should within a fully inclusive learning community.

Governors have been proactive in undertaking training to strengthen their capacity to support the academy and hold leaders to account for students' performance. Governors review progress on key areas for improvement at regular meetings of the Progress Board. Individual governors have also been attached to departments so that they can increase their understanding of the academy's work. The governing body has developed carefully considered plans to ensure effective succession planning to promote sustainable improvement in the future.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- plan and implement an effective system of self-evaluation – good

External support

The governing body has valued the guidance provided by representatives of the National College for School Leaders and the Department for Education which has helped them to prioritise training needs and make visits to providers where governance is outstanding. This support is making a good contribution to increasing governors' understanding of the work of the academy and strengthening their capacity to hold leaders to account for students' performance.

A priority for further improvement is for leaders to:

- monitor and evaluate the impact of recently-introduced strategies to improve outcomes for students with a special educational need and for those who are at the early stages of learning English as an additional language.