

# The Birches School

## Inspection report

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<b>Unique Reference Number</b>	105613
<b>Local authority</b>	Manchester
<b>Inspection number</b>	377268
<b>Inspection dates</b>	11–12 July 2012
<b>Lead inspector</b>	Hilary Ward

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

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<b>Type of school</b>	Special
<b>School category</b>	Community special
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	2–11
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	115
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Allison Forbes
<b>Headteacher</b>	Andy Pitts
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	8 July 2009
<b>School address</b>	Newholme Road West Didsbury Manchester M20 2XZ
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## Introduction

Inspection team

Hilary Ward  
Maureen Coleman

Additional Inspector  
Additional Inspector

This inspection was carried out with two days' notice. Inspectors observed teaching and learning in 15 lessons, each taught by a different member of staff. Meetings were held with senior staff, middle school leaders, members of the governing body including a parent governor and with a group of pupils. Inspectors took account of the views of parents and carers in the 50 questionnaire responses returned. They observed the school's work, and looked at documents including those relating to pupil progress, school improvement, curriculum planning, safeguarding and partnership work.

## Information about the school

The Birches is a large special school for pupils with a range of complex special educational needs. Almost a half of pupils have autism spectrum disorders, a small group has social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. The remaining pupils have severe learning difficulties or profound and multiple learning difficulties including some with complex medical conditions. All have a statement of special educational needs. About two thirds of pupils are boys. The large majority of pupils are of African-Caribbean or Asian heritage with over half from homes where English is an additional language. The percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is well above average. Most pupils are drawn from central and eastern areas of Manchester and a few come from neighbouring authorities.

The school provides for children at the Early Years Foundation Stage but at present numbers are very small and these children are included in classes of pupils who are at a similar development phase. The school has an outreach role to approximately 50 mainstream primary schools.

The school has a number of awards including Leading Parent Partnership, Investors in People, National Healthy Schools, Silver Sing Up and various sports awards including a Manchester PE and School Sports Innovation Award.

**Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory and 4 is inadequate**  
Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

## Inspection judgements

<b>Overall Effectiveness</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Achievement of pupils</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Quality of teaching</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Behaviour and safety of pupils</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Leadership and management</b>	<b>1</b>

## Key Findings

- The Birches is an outstanding school in every respect. Providing pupils with effective communication is at the heart of its work. Excellent partnerships with parents and carers ensure consistent management of communication and behaviour across school and home. Many parents/carers expressed their appreciation of the support offered to them by the school with one parent accurately describing it as 'working in harmony'. The school is not complacent and has ambitious aims to further improve provision for pupils with autism spectrum conditions.
- Pupils' achievement is outstanding because teaching is outstanding. Pupils join the school with skills, knowledge and understanding which are very low when compared to those expected for their age. The highly personalised approach to planning and assessment ensures that pupils make outstanding progress particularly in their personal and social development. Higher ability pupils begin to develop reading, writing and number skills which they will be able to build on and use in later life.
- Pupils' behaviour is outstanding. Behaviour management is agreed by all members of staff and strategies are applied consistently. Pupils have excellent attitudes to learning and love to achieve rewards which are celebrated by the whole school. Parents and carers and the pupils themselves share the view that the school keeps them very safe.
- Leadership, management and governance are outstanding and aspirational. All members of staff share a vision and drive to continually review and improve the provision the school makes for the changing needs of its pupils. The monitoring of performance of staff is highly effective in identifying areas for professional development and the sharing of best practice. The excellent curriculum is adapted to meet the needs of the different groups of pupils and to promote their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development exceptionally well.

## What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Strengthen the provision for the increasing number of pupils with autism spectrum disorders further by achieving Autism Accreditation within two years.

## Main Report

### Achievement of pupils

Achievement is outstanding and inspectors endorse parents' and carers' positive views. In all lessons observed during the inspection, pupils made at least good and often outstanding progress. This matches the assessments from the school's own monitoring of teaching and learning. Inspectors spoke to pupils who were all extremely positive about what they learn in school.

The nature of pupils' special educational needs means that the vast majority of pupils enter the school at very low starting points. Pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties have often been out of school for long periods of time or have experienced failed placements which have impacted on their progress. Once settled into the happy and safe atmosphere of the school, where pupils are cared for and supported exceptionally well, they make rapid progress. Higher ability pupils are able to reach Levels 1 or 2 of the National Curriculum in their reading and number work and pupils with behavioural difficulties sometimes reach even higher levels. Pupils with severe learning difficulties or autism spectrum disorders are able to sound out words and reproduce them on the computer.

For the large majority of pupils, progress is in very small steps. Rigorous assessment ensures the learning and development needs of each pupil are well understood. Teachers set targets which are ambitious but achievable because they know their pupils so well. The careful analysis of attainment, linked to effective interventions, ensures that all groups of pupils make equally splendid progress. For some pupils with more profound difficulties, steps are so small that they cannot be measured by currently available assessment materials. The school is anxious to demonstrate the real milestones these achievements represent and has usefully been developing its own small steps assessment tools. Children at the Early Years Foundation Stage are very well included into classes of pupils with similar learning needs and at a similar developmental stage and make equally outstanding progress as their older peers.

The first priority of the school is to give pupils an effective communication system. The range of communication strategies which are carefully planned and resourced for the differing needs of pupils help them to make great strides in their learning and their personal, social and independence skills. Pupils with little or no verbal communication are able to use visual symbols, picture exchange communication system, signing, objects of reference and switches effectively to express their basic needs and wishes.

The vast array of curriculum opportunities which teachers provide, particularly in subjects such as physical education, music and other creative subjects, enable pupils

to succeed in whatever way they can. Many of these activities take them out into the community and promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development exceptionally well. They raise pupils' self-esteem and confidence. Pupils are immensely proud of their achievements and the awards they gain in sports competitions, dance, singing and cheerleading. They celebrate these and their individual target rewards enthusiastically at 'WOW' assemblies to which parents and carers and members of the governing body are invited.

### **Quality of teaching**

All of the teaching seen during the inspection was at least good and more than two thirds of it was outstanding. Parents and carers are rightly confident that their children are well taught. They feel and appreciate being very involved in their child's learning. Teachers view them as partners in the learning process and this makes a valuable contribution to the progress pupils make. At the Early Years Foundation Stage and at other times of admission, transitions are carefully planned by staff teams, including specialist professionals. As a result, children quickly settle and begin to make progress.

The exceptionally high expectations teachers have for their pupils are evident in their very careful assessment, personalised planning and in the learning outcomes they set for each pupil. Teaching assistants give very effective support. They work with the teachers as highly successful teams to ensure that activities and resources are appropriate for the new learning of each child. For instance, in a numeracy lesson, three pupils worked with the teacher on 'counting on', while four pupils worked with two teaching assistants matching numbers to shapes. Another pupil was working with an assistant writing a sum using the mathematics language he had developed. Each pupil in the class had learning objectives which were challenging for them as individuals and the support provided was ensuring the objectives were achievable and enjoyable. Consequently, learning was outstanding.

Teachers are very knowledgeable about the different special educational needs of the pupil groups and use a suitably wide range of strategies to ensure they learn. Specialist professionals have a vital role to play. Wherever possible, therapies are incorporated into lesson planning to ensure pupils' personal needs are met without disrupting learning. Routines are recognised as extremely important for many of the pupils to help them settle into the day and to prepare them to learn. Lessons are lively and stimulating such as the one in which pupils with behavioural difficulties enjoyed sampling foods from Asia and finding adjectives to describe them. The rich curriculum provides a wealth of opportunities to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, often through outdoor learning, physical activity, by many visits out of school and by visitors coming in. Attention is paid to the cultural diversity of pupils by celebrating their festivals, inviting parents and carers to run food stalls or workshops at the school fair or by enjoying samba drumming and reggae music sessions.

### **Behaviour and safety of pupils**

Parents and carers, pupils and staff are all agreed that the school is a calm and settled community. Pupils feel safe and happy in school. This security reduces

anxiety especially for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and those with autism spectrum conditions so that they can make progress in their personal development as well as their learning. Pupils are treated with dignity and respect and enjoy very supportive relationships with staff. The consistent management of behaviour has a high priority. Staff are very well trained to manage incidents of challenging behaviour which occasionally arise as a consequence of pupils' special educational needs. As a result, incidents do not disrupt learning or impact on other pupils. Incidents are carefully logged and analysed to identify triggers and reduce risks with the aim of helping pupils learn to self-manage their behaviour. Information is shared in excellent pupil passports and behaviour support plans. The consistent approach links to pupils' homes to support parents and carers who may experience difficulties with their children at home.

Observations, discussions and scrutiny of related school records reveal that there is little or no bullying or racism. Pupils were seen to be very supportive of each other, for example, when a young boy put his arm comfortably round another pupil when she was asked a question and was unsure of the answer. In all lessons, pupils had very positive attitudes to learning. Staff encourage pupils to do as much for themselves as they can and as far as possible teach them how to keep themselves safe and about the different forms that bullying can take, even though for some this may be very limited. The school has strong partnerships with other agencies and enlist them to provide additional support when necessary to ensure children whose circumstances make them vulnerable, are safe. Pupils want to come to school. With the exception of a few pupils who have complex medical needs, attendance is average for schools of this type. The school works hard with families who sometimes have difficulty sending their children to school to improve attendance further.

## **Leadership and management**

Leadership, management and governance are outstanding. Since the previous inspection when the school was also judged to be outstanding, leaders and managers have continuously reviewed provision and managed performance to ensure that positive outcomes for pupils are sustained and improved. Their capacity to continue to improve is unquestionable. Achievement is excellent because pupils are so well taught and senior leaders monitor teaching and learning rigorously and accurately so that the highest of standards are maintained. Their findings inform decisions about professional development of the staff who, at all levels, are eager to meet pupils' needs in the best possible way. The needs of every child are considered individually and the whole school community demonstrates a commitment to equal opportunities. As a result of the increasing number of pupils presenting with autism spectrum disorders, the school has made the decision that it should work towards Autism Accreditation with the National Autistic Society. The inspection team recognises this as a very ambitious challenge but agrees that it will improve provision and outcomes for these pupils still further.

Members of the governing body are frequent visitors into school and monitor areas such as safeguarding, health and safety and pupil progress data with rigour. As a result, these aspects are exemplary. They provide excellent challenge and support to the school's managers in meeting ambitious targets. The curriculum is outstanding. Attention to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is embedded

through all aspects of the curriculum. The school regards partnerships with parents and carers of vital importance. The parent-liaison worker and other staff visit homes to share information and advice on issues such as communication, behaviour, feeding and sleeping. These links are very much valued by the families concerned. The school works closely with its partners in its outreach role, in networks of schools, with other agencies and professionals to increase curriculum opportunities and to make exceptional provision for the well-being of its pupils.

## Glossary

### What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

### Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	54	42	2	2
Primary schools	14	49	32	6
Secondary schools	20	39	34	7
Special schools	33	45	20	3
Pupil referral units	9	55	28	8
All schools	16	47	31	6

New school inspection arrangements have been introduced from 1 January 2012. This means that inspectors make judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September to 31 December 2011 and represent judgements that were made under the school inspection arrangements that were introduced on 1 September 2009. These data are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Primary schools include primary academy converters. Secondary schools include secondary academy converters, sponsor-led academies and city technology colleges. Special schools include special academy converters and non-maintained special schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

## Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning and development taking account of their attainment.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Attendance	the regular attendance of pupils at school and in lessons, taking into account the school's efforts to encourage good attendance.
Behaviour	how well pupils behave in lessons, with emphasis on their attitude to learning. Pupils' punctuality to lessons and their conduct around the school.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving based on its self-evaluation and what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Floor standards	the national minimum expectation of attainment and progression measures.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the governors and headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.
Safety	how safe pupils are in school, including in lessons; and their understanding of risks. Pupils' freedom from bullying and harassment. How well the school promotes safety, for example e-learning.

**This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.**



13 July 2012

Dear Pupils

**Inspection of The Birches School, Manchester M20 2XZ**

Thank you for helping us to find out about your school when my colleague and I visited this week. I am writing this letter to tell you what we found.

Your school is a wonderful place and gives you an outstanding education. Your teachers are excellent at planning work which matches all your very different needs and helps you to make excellent progress. They make sure that your parents and carers are as involved as possible in helping you to learn too.

You all try your best. You love to get your rewards and celebrate them at assemblies. Although some of you get worried at times, you try to stay calm and behave really well in lessons and around school. We thought your behaviour was outstanding.

The people in charge of your school are doing a fantastic job. They keep you safe and happy and are always looking for ways to make things better for you. We know the school has decided to go for a really big award of Autism Accreditation. It will be a lot of work but we agree that it will help to raise standards for you even further.

We want to wish you all the best in achieving this award and know that you will all help The Birches to be successful.

Yours sincerely

Hilary Ward  
Lead inspector

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