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6 March 2025

Paul Masher
Principal
Birches Head Academy
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Dear Mr Masher,

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Birches Head Academy

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection that took place on 28 January 2025, on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills. The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8 (2) of the Education Act 2005 and was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in October 2023.

The purpose of a monitoring inspection is not to grade the school's key and (where applicable) provision judgements, but to identify and report on the school's progress. It is to highlight to the school and parents any improvements that school leaders have made since the school's previous graded inspection.

During the inspection, Chris Stevens, His Majesty's Inspector (HMI), and I discussed with you and other senior leaders, the chief executive officer (CEO) of the trust, the deputy CEO of the trust, trustees and local governors, the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent graded inspection. We discussed the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We also held meetings about behaviour and attendance, visited lessons, talked to pupils and reviewed school improvement documentation. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the school to no longer be judged as having serious weaknesses.

The progress made towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation

There have been several changes to the school's leadership team since the previous inspection. You started as principal in May 2024, shortly after the appointment of a new vice principal who has strategic responsibility for behaviour, attendance and school culture.

The school has seen a shift in the pupil cohort profile since the previous inspection, with many more pupils starting at the school during the academic year. This poses an additional challenge to your work to create a strong, positive culture that is well understood by all.

We agreed that this inspection would focus primarily on behaviour and attendance, as these formed key areas for improvement from the previous inspection.

You have rightly prioritised improving attendance and raising the profile of its importance with parents, carers, pupils and staff. Leaders at all levels are determined that all pupils will be supported and challenged to attend well. The attendance team has been expanded. Leaders have analysed patterns in, and issues with, attendance at both cohort and pupil levels. They are using this information to work with parents to identify barriers and are working to remove these barriers, with notable and significant positive impact. A new attendance procedure sets clear expectations for pupils and their parents. It explains what attendance percentages mean in terms of missed days of school. A helpful chart exemplifying this is on the school's website for parents to see. As a result of all of this, overall attendance for the whole school is improving, and significant gains are being made in all year groups and for groups of pupils. Furthermore, some significant improvements in the attendance of some pupils whose attendance was previously very low indeed have already been made.

There has been a focus on improving the culture across the school and creating a calm, safe environment for all. Pupils and staff know that the bar has been raised since you started and that expectations are high, but so is the support to help meet these standards. You and your team are keen to ensure that pupils understand the values behind these high expectations, so that they choose to behave in a way that reflects their sense of 'it's who I am'.

Thought has been put into routines that are easily understood and support consistency, including how staff duties are organised at break and lunchtimes. Most pupils behave calmly and respectfully in lessons and as they move around the school. Leaders model warm, respectful relationships in their interactions with pupils. When pupils make the wrong choice, the school now uses a restorative approach to encourage them to get it right next time. Staff feel well supported with managing any poor behaviour they may encounter.

The number of suspensions has risen and remains high as leaders are taking a firmer line on unsafe and unacceptable behaviours. However, there is a plan in place to use them more sparingly in the future. The team has developed a range of support strategies to help pupils who find it difficult to meet the academy's expectations, including individual behaviour support plans and the tailored intervention programme followed in 'the Romero centre'. These approaches are already reducing the number of pupils receiving repeat suspensions. Furthermore, the number of times pupils are removed from lessons has reduced significantly this term.

Your plan to tackle bullying is starting to show impact. Pupils have been learning about the importance of celebrating and valuing diversity, for example through the work of the pupil-led 'equal opps' team. You have made sure that pupils have a greater understanding about the difference between unkind behaviour and bullying. There is increased pupil confidence in the value of reporting bullying, but there is still more to be done.

Work is underway to improve the quality of education at the school. You know that this will take time. There is a clear structure for monitoring its effectiveness and the team knows what needs to improve. The school's 'consistency across the academy' (CATA) approach is showing movement towards greater consistency in what effective learning should look like. Leaders at all levels know the importance of this work in ensuring the best outcomes and subsequent life choices for pupils. The examination outcomes in 2024 did not show meaningful improvement on the 2023 outcomes. The school is working hard to help current Year 11 pupils achieve as well as possible this summer, including additional interventions and a 'steps to success' event with parents and carers.

There has been a focus on the development of middle and senior leaders to ensure that they have greater clarity around their roles and responsibilities within school improvement. Many of them are also new to role. You have improved the way key data is collated and shared so that leaders at all levels have a more detailed understanding of where there are gaps that need addressing. You are committed to the principle of 'working smart' and ensuring that the workload of staff is manageable when changes are made.

Since the previous inspection, there have been changes made at trust level to better support the school. There has been an increase in trust leadership capacity. There have been changes made to the local governing board, including a new chair, to add significant educational expertise. The trust has introduced 'challenge board' meetings to ensure there is greater rigour to the checking of the school's work to improve. Everyone is committed to seeing the school improve.

You and your team have an honest, accurate understanding of the school and where further improvement is needed. Where appropriate, you are making effective use of external local support. Leaders are monitoring carefully how well the school is addressing the areas for improvement from the previous inspection. Your improvement plans are focused and are helping the school to make progress against these priorities. The work you have carried out over the last year is starting to show impact.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, the CEO of the Frank Field Education Trust, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Stoke-on-Trent. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Nicola Beech
His Majesty's Inspector