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Mr Gil Bourgade
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Bourgade

Short inspection of Birkdale High School

Following my visit to the school on 18 October 2017 with Vicky Atherton, Ofsted Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since your school was judged to be good in November 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

After a significant period of instability for the school, in 2014 you took up post and quickly established a stable and loyal senior leadership team. You have developed effective leadership at all levels by valuing the skills and knowledge of long-serving staff while also appointing new leaders with recent experience in other contexts.

There has been significant change in the composition of the governing body. Governors now bring to their roles a wide range of skills in education, human resources, business and finance. As a result, they ask detailed questions of you and your staff about all aspects of school life and about the impact that leaders' decisions have on pupils. They are very ambitious for the boys, give of their time freely and visit the school regularly to see first-hand how their policies are working.

You, alongside the governors, have not shied away from making difficult staffing decisions to ensure that the financial plan agreed with the Education and Skills Funding Agency delivers a balanced budget within the expected timescale. You have successfully addressed the decline in pupil numbers by re-establishing the school's good reputation with parents, local primary schools and the local community. This year, there are 50 more pupils in Year 7 than there were in 2014.

You have prioritised developing the capacity of middle leadership. Subject leaders now play a significant role in monitoring standards and quality in their areas of responsibility. They welcome the increased autonomy that you have given them and appreciate the balance of support and challenge that senior leaders bring. Consequently, their role in the recent improvements in academic achievement has been pivotal.

Staff recognise that changes for the better have taken place and they are overwhelmingly positive about how you and your team lead and manage the school. All staff who responded to Ofsted's questionnaire said that they are proud to be a member of staff at Birkdale. A typical comment was, 'The headteacher and governors are very supportive yet challenging. We are much more accountable but morale is the best it's been in a long time.'

Pupils also recognise that the school continues to improve. In particular, Year 11 pupils commented to inspectors how behaviour and teaching have changed for the better over the time that they have been pupils at the school. One of those chosen for interview by inspectors said, 'The school now has a good feel to it and teaching is much better than it used to be.'

Pupils are proud of their school, behave well and respect the environment. I and my colleague saw good behaviour and relationships at all times. We saw no graffiti, litter or damage. We found the boys to be respectful, courteous and keen to talk to us.

You have successfully addressed the areas for improvement identified in the last inspection report:

- The recent creation of an assistant headteacher post for teaching and learning has given developments in this area even more ambition and focus. Teachers and teaching assistants now use an online classroom to share best practice and to raise questions about pedagogy. Staff appreciate that leaders identify and celebrate high-quality teaching every fortnight. Teachers work with other schools to develop their skills. Birkdale staff participate in, and contribute to, continuing professional development as part of the North Sefton Coastal Teaching School Alliance, and use links with Edge Hill University. All teaching staff are involved in action research on specific areas of their own practice. I and my inspector colleague saw first-hand how teaching staff, including teaching assistants, embrace opportunities to develop professionally and to contribute to school improvement.
- Assessment and tracking are much more thorough and robust than they were at the time of the last inspection. Leaders and teachers use accurate assessment information well to plan early intervention, particularly for disadvantaged pupils.
- Pupils use the school's 'fix-it' time very well to reflect on teachers' written feedback and to correct and improve the quality of their work.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders ensure that the school community is vigilant in terms of safeguarding. Parents' responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire for parents indicate that they have confidence that the school's systems and processes will keep their sons safe from physical and emotional harm. The school has carried out all the checks necessary to make sure that adults are suitable to work with children and young people. Staff have undertaken significant training and are fully committed to the school's policy that safeguarding pupils is the responsibility of all. Risk assessments of educational visits and travel arrangements for pupils are thorough and meet all requirements.

Staff teach pupils how to keep themselves safe when using the internet and social media, and strong firewalls ensure that no one can access inappropriate websites in school. Pupils benefit from visits from a good range of external agencies, including the local police, to develop an understanding of issues such as extremism and grooming.

Staff are meticulous in choosing the type and quality of alternative provision for the small number of pupils educated off site. Comprehensive communication structures and protocols ensure that staff monitor placements well and that they are successful for pupils and their families.

Inspection findings

- Overall, the progress of pupils is above average and improving. There has been a significant improvement in the achievement of pupils in both mathematics and English, and you and your staff and governors have reversed the decline in the achievement of the middle-ability group.
- Historically in this school, the difference between the progress of disadvantaged pupils and that of other pupils nationally has been too wide. We agreed that this issue would be a focus for the inspection. With you and one of your assistant headteachers, I scrutinised examination results from 2017 and, with subject leaders, I and my inspector colleague analysed the work of pupils currently in the school. It is very clear that you have used the pupil premium funding to good effect. The strategies outlined in the school's plan for disadvantaged pupils have been successful in improving outcomes. Leaders and teaching staff have worked hard to monitor and support disadvantaged pupils in the classroom and to provide a range of extra learning activities. As a result, in 2017 the progress scores for disadvantaged pupils were consistently positive. Differences between disadvantaged pupils and their peers have diminished, but you recognise that the progress of this group should be even more rapid.
- You have used funding very well for pupils who need to catch up in English in Year 7. As a result of intervention and small group work, almost all had caught up with their peers by the end of Year 7. In mathematics, support was less effective, with only half improving quickly enough. You had already identified this weakness and have made changes to mathematics catch-up provision this year.

- Although the attendance of most pupils in the school is good, another agreed area for focus was the attendance of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and of those entitled to free school meals. Too many of these pupils have not attended school regularly enough and this has had a negative impact on their academic progress. The actions that your staff have taken to improve their attendance have made some difference, and there has been a little improvement. You agreed, however, that you need to do further work with these pupils and their families, so that the pupils attend school regularly and achieve their full potential.
- The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum that ensures that pupils can achieve good GCSE results across a wide range of subjects. Despite this, as you had already identified, the number of pupils not entering GCSE in a modern foreign language (MFL) has, over time, prevented many from achieving the English Baccalaureate (EBacc). You have made changes to the curriculum to ensure that, for the current Years 7 to 10, numbers achieving the EBacc will increase significantly.
- The well-being of pupils is a high priority for all leaders and staff. Pupils and parents speak very highly of the quality of care and welfare in the school. Transition arrangements for Year 7 pupils ensure that all settle in quickly. Year 8 pupils enjoy being peer mentors for Year 7 and wear their badges with pride. A typical comment from a Year 7 pupil was, 'I was frightened of coming to secondary school but it's fantastic!' A very small number of parents expressed concern that the school does not address the specific needs of some pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. School records and case studies, as well as testimonials from parents of pupils who have specific needs and free-text comments on Ofsted's Parent View questionnaire, indicate that provision in this area is very strong. The school has robust procedures to identify specific needs using external expertise. The school's special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) involves external agencies and parents in planning appropriate provision, which is then well resourced by the school.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the difference between the progress of disadvantaged pupils and that of their peers diminishes more rapidly
- pupils in Year 7 who need support in mathematics catch up as quickly as they do in English
- pupils who are disadvantaged and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities attend school more regularly.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Sefton. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Liz Kelly
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, I had discussions with you, your leadership team and members of the governing body. Jointly with you and members of your senior leadership team, I and my inspector colleague observed teaching. We spoke to a range of pupils in lessons, in discussion groups and at social times. My colleague listened to pupils read and scrutinised reading records. With subject leaders, we looked at a range of pupils' work. We analysed your website and a selection of documents, including the single central record, records of child protection and staff training, the school's self-evaluation and improvement planning. We also scrutinised anonymised case studies of pupils currently in the school. We discussed with senior leaders aspects of safeguarding, attendance, behaviour and the use of funding. I spoke to a cross-section of teachers and the SENCo. My colleague spoke to subject leaders. We considered 194 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, including many free-text comments made by parents. We also considered 34 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire.