

Birchwood Community High School

Brock Road, Birchwood, Warrington, Cheshire WA3 7PT

Inspection dates

10–11 October 2018

Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Good
16 to 19 study programmes	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The school's leaders, including governors, have successfully implemented plans to ensure that pupils currently in the school make good progress.
- For several years, pupils did not reach their full potential at GCSE. However, in 2018 most of those who attended the school for the whole of Years 10 and 11 achieved results broadly in line with similar pupils across the country.
- In 2017, a significant number of pupils joined the school very late in Year 10. As a result, in 2018, some were unable to achieve the GCSE results of which they would otherwise have been capable.
- Students studying applied and technical courses in the sixth form make significantly better progress than the national average. However, those studying for academic qualifications make less progress than they should.
- To meet the needs and aspirations of students, leaders have reduced the number of A levels offered. These have been chosen to complement applied and technical qualifications, which are a long-standing strength of the school.
- The difference between the progress made by disadvantaged pupils and their peers is diminishing too slowly at key stage 4.
- Almost all teaching in the school is now good. Leaders have used appraisal, monitoring and training opportunities well to remedy the weaknesses in teaching which inspectors identified during the last inspection.
- Most pupils attend school regularly. This places the school in line with national averages for attendance.
- Disadvantaged pupils do not attend school as regularly as their peers. However, actions taken by leaders have reduced by more than half the rates of absence of those who previously had the worst attendance records in this group.
- Leaders have made significant changes to the 11–16 curriculum. Pupils now have opportunities to choose from a good range of subjects which match their aspirations and capabilities.
- The quality of middle leadership has improved considerably since the last inspection. Strong middle leaders, both pastoral and academic, have played a significant role in improvements in teaching, behaviour and pupils' progress.
- The behaviour of pupils in lessons and at social times is good. They respond positively to the well-developed system of rewards and sanctions.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the rate at which the attendance and progress of disadvantaged pupils improve at key stage 4 by ensuring that actions and spending are more closely linked to pupils' specific barriers to learning.
- Continue with plans to refocus the sixth form and ensure its long-term viability.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Leaders, including governors, have an accurate view of the quality of education in the school. They have effectively addressed the areas for improvement which inspectors identified at the last inspection.
- They have welcomed external support from the leadership of two other schools and an independent school improvement partner. In addition, participation in 'subject hubs' organised by the local authority and the work undertaken by specialist leaders of education from other schools have been significant in developing better teaching and subject leadership as well as more accurate assessment.
- A legacy of inconsistent teaching and subject leadership was still evident in the school's GCSE results in 2017 but less so in 2018. Well-planned changes have had an increasingly positive impact with time. Pupils currently in the school, especially at key stage 3, now make good progress.
- Senior leaders and governors have used appraisal well to improve classroom practice and have achieved a good balance between challenging and supporting teachers. They have an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses of teaching in the school and have used this information well to bring about improvements.
- The current leadership of teaching and learning has resulted in well-focused monitoring and more targeted continuing professional development. The new and detailed teaching-and-learning policy has provided well-devised guidance to teachers and outlined clear expectations of non-negotiable aspects of every lesson.
- Leaders have made positive changes in middle leadership. Subject leaders have worked with determination and skill to address weaknesses in their areas.
- Heads of year have an increased role in monitoring 'the whole child'. Electronic systems allow them to spot at an early stage if pupils' attitudes, attendance, conduct or academic progress are deteriorating and to work with subject leaders and form tutors to intervene.
- The headteacher has recognised the strength of this team of middle leaders and rearranged teaching and form rooms to facilitate informal monitoring. She has ensured that middle leaders now play a significant role in initiating and developing the changes which have improved the school.
- Actions to diminish differences in the progress and attendance of disadvantaged pupils and their peers have had some impact, particularly at key stage 3. However, differences remain, especially at key stage 4.
- Recent changes in the leadership of support for disadvantaged pupils have resulted in more precision in the criteria by which leaders, including governors, can evaluate the success of actions. However, current and previous plans do not link actions or spending closely enough to an analysis of the barriers to learning which these pupils face.
- Leaders have devised effective support for pupils who arrive in Year 7 needing to catch up with their peers in English and mathematics. They have used most of the funding available to enable small-group work led by an extra mathematics teacher, an extra

English teacher and a teaching assistant. By the beginning of Year 8, most of these pupils have markedly improved numeracy and literacy skills, particularly in relation to their reading age.

- Inspectors saw literacy being developed across subjects other than English as well as the development of numeracy in science and geography lessons.
- The leadership of special educational needs is highly effective. Leaders have used funding well to target support within and outside class, and consequently the progress of this group is strong.
- At key stages 3 and 4, the time allocated to each subject has been revised. Pupils now have better opportunities to reach their full potential in English and mathematics and across a wide range of subjects. At key stage 4, leaders have introduced three curricular 'pathways' to suit pupils' needs, capabilities and aspirations. Inspectors' discussions with individual pupils showed that these pathways are flexible and have accommodated unusual combinations of subjects and qualifications.
- Staff have mapped the school's Learning for Life programme well so that it covers personal, social and health education. It also contributes to pupils' appreciation of fundamental values such as democracy and respect. Heads of year monitor the delivery of the programme to check its quality and how pupils respond.
- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is strong. Relationships between pupils are very positive and there is a wide-ranging programme of extra-curricular activities and educational visits.

Governance of the school

- The governance of the school is effective.
- The board of trustees fulfils its statutory duties and acts as the local governing body.
- Since the last inspection there have been significant positive changes in membership and practice.
- Governors have been reflective, honest and determined about the need for change. They responded swiftly to the recommendations made in the review of governance which followed the previous inspection.
- Members of the governing body bring a range of relevant skills to their role, including financial expertise and current and past school leadership.
- They scrutinise examination results and the information that leaders give them and ask questions of school leaders. They have challenged leaders well in relation to the implementation of policies and the use of finances.
- The governing body is becoming more effective in holding the headteacher to account for pupils' progress and attendance as well as the impact of the pupil premium funding.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Leaders, including governors, understand their role in all aspects of safeguarding.

- Policies and procedures are in line with the latest national guidance and are up to date.
- Teachers make sure that pupils know how to keep themselves safe when using the internet and mobile technology.
- The school works closely with parents and carers as well as external agencies to ensure that procedures and practice keep pupils safe.
- Staff help pupils to understand the dangers of extremist behaviour and radicalisation.
- Staff are well trained in safeguarding and know which procedures to follow if they have concerns.
- At the start of the inspection, there were some minor omissions in the single central record (SCR). Despite this, leaders and governors are very careful when appointing staff and assure themselves of candidates' suitability for working with children and young people. The school had the missing information elsewhere and included it in the SCR before the end of the inspection.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Since the last inspection, leaders have prioritised improving teaching and ensured that it now leads to consistently good progress for pupils.
- Teachers use the new teaching-and-learning policy well in lesson planning and delivery. As a result, pupils benefit from a consistency of approach across subjects and year groups. The 'progress arrow', which teachers use in every lesson, promotes a good match of activities to pupils' prior attainment and capabilities.
- Some variability in the quality of implementation of the recommended teaching strategies remains. However, leaders are aware of this, and support for the small number of teachers involved is helping them to improve.
- Teachers develop pupils' resilience when work becomes difficult. They ensure that pupils do not give up too quickly or rely too much on help from adults.
- Teachers in this school are committed and well-qualified subject specialists. They use their subject knowledge well to plan activities which give pupils the opportunity to learn effectively. Knowledge of their subjects also enables them to ask searching questions to check pupils' understanding and depth of knowledge.
- Homework is making a difference to pupils' learning. An online system now allows teachers to set a variety of homework which reflects a wider range of subject skills, such as listening in modern foreign languages. It also allows parents to check easily and quickly what their children are supposed to be working on at home. Teachers, subject leaders and year heads use this system to check patterns of non-completion of homework within and across subjects. In this way, they can follow up individual pupils and involve parents if necessary.
- The school's 'Go to First' policy has resulted in teachers giving priority to addressing the needs of disadvantaged pupils. This has had more impact at key stage 3 than it has at key stage 4.

- Teachers have high expectations of behaviour in lessons. They use the school's agreed rewards and sanctions well. It is rare that lesson time is wasted because of inattention or minor disruption.
- Teachers use the school's feedback policy well to give pupils guidance on how to improve.
- The school's questionnaires and Ofsted's online survey indicate that teachers keep parents well informed about their children's progress and what they could do to achieve more.
- In conversation with inspectors, pupils said that neither staff nor pupils tolerate derogatory language. They were keen to explain that everyone welcomes and celebrates difference and diversity at Birchwood.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Good-quality and well-resourced pastoral support for vulnerable pupils contributes to improving their behaviour, attendance and progress.
- The school's 'Right to Learn, Right to Teach' policy promotes and rewards pupils' positive attitudes to learning. In lessons, pupils are cooperative and keen to do well.
- Pupils take pride in their work and, with guidance from teachers, organise it in a way which helps them to revisit and revise topics.
- They make full use of the school's arrangements for careers information, education and guidance (CIEAG) to help them make important subject choices at the end of key stages 3 and 4.
- Teachers ensure that pupils have the skills and knowledge to keep themselves safe from physical and emotional harm. During the inspection, pupils explained well how to avoid the dangers of mobile technology and the internet. They also showed a good knowledge of the risks associated with extremism and radicalisation.
- Discussions with pupils and scrutiny of the school's records indicate that bullying is rare. Pupils said that when it happens, they tell staff and know that someone will take action to stop it happening again.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- The behaviour policy, which teachers implemented at the start of this academic year, is already having a positive impact on pupils' conduct.
- Pupils have responded well to higher expectations of punctuality. They arrive promptly at lessons and settle down to work quickly. Lessons run smoothly because pupils behave well and follow instructions quickly.

- Relationships among pupils and between pupils and staff are very positive. At social times, staff supervision can be unobtrusive because pupils enjoy socialising calmly. Occasionally, there is some unintentionally boisterous behaviour in the playground or in corridors, but pupils and staff ensure that this is short-lived.
- Pastoral staff work hard with pupils and their families to encourage good attendance. Leaders regularly remind pupils and parents of the link between attendance and achievement. As a result, overall attendance is consistently broadly in line with the national average.
- Disadvantaged pupils continue to attend less regularly than their peers. Staff are tenacious in following up absences and supporting families or holding them to account. As a result, they have succeeded in reducing by more than 50% the absence rates of the worst attenders within this key group.
- The school monitors well the attendance, welfare, safety and academic progress of the small number of pupils who attend alternative provision at New Horizons.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- In the past, pupils underachieved, when taking into account the full range of subjects which they studied at GCSE.
- Improved teaching and subject leadership have ensured that pupils currently in the school make good progress. This is particularly evident at key stage 3 where previously inconsistent teaching and middle leadership have not taken their toll.
- Scrutiny of work by inspectors and comparison of the school's accurate assessment information from the end of Year 10 show that pupils currently in Year 11 are making better progress than last year's cohort.
- In 2018, those pupils who had been at Birchwood for the whole of Years 10 and 11 made the same progress as other pupils nationally with similar Year 7 starting points. This represents an improvement from 2016 and 2017 when pupils' progress was significantly worse than that of similar pupils across the country.
- After the closure of a local studio school, in 2017 a substantial number of pupils joined Birchwood at the end of Year 10. These pupils had followed a curriculum which did not match the school's curriculum and some of the courses they had undertaken did not lead to GCSE qualifications. The school did its very best to accommodate their needs in the time available, but a significant number underachieved in 2018.
- Disadvantaged pupils do not achieve as well as their peers. At key stage 3, this difference is diminishing more and more as pupils move up the school. However, in Years 10 and 11, disadvantaged pupils are not catching up with their peers rapidly enough.
- Leaders have put in place systems to identify quickly the specific needs of pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. As a result, staff are able to give them help in time to contribute to the consistently good progress that they make.
- Staff give pupils the opportunity to read a wide range of texts at home and in school. Pupils enjoy reading for pleasure and read aloud with confidence and good comprehension skills.

- The proportion of pupils who remain in sustained education, employment or training after leaving the school is consistently above the national average. Effective CIEAG contributes significantly to this.

16 to 19 study programmes

Good

- Leadership of the sixth form remains strong.
- The study programmes followed by students meet the requirements of the Department for Education.
- The progress made by pupils studying for general applied qualifications consistently remains significantly above the national average.
- The proportion of students who improve their English and mathematics GCSE grades also remains significantly above the national average.
- Although there is a three-year improving trend in A-level attainment, students studying for A levels continue to make less progress than they should. Despite this, in 2018 most went on to study at their first-choice university.
- A-level results show that the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers has narrowed in the last two years. In applied general courses, they make at least as much progress as non-disadvantaged students.
- Girls do not make as much progress as boys at A level, but usually outperform them in applied general courses.
- Students in the sixth form are keen to learn and they behave well. Most use their qualifications well to move on to the next stage of their education or undertake apprenticeships or employment.
- Lesson observations and work scrutiny by inspectors indicate that the quality of teaching in the sixth form is good, including for the small number of A-level groups that remain. This matches the information gathered by the school's leaders when monitoring teaching.
- A significant number of students left the sixth form between Years 12 and 13 at the end of the last academic year. They had chosen courses which they no longer believed met their needs. As a result, leaders have increased the amount of guidance students have access to before making post-16 choices.
- As part of a wide range of student services available to sixth formers, the school uses a dedicated careers officer. Current students gave inspectors examples of how helpful they found the CIEAG provided when making choices about their education and future careers.
- The first cohort of six Warrington Wolves rugby players completed their sixth-form courses at Birchwood in 2018. All left Year 13 having obtained level 3 qualifications and obtained either a contract with the club or appropriate apprenticeships.
- Leaders carefully monitor the compulsory work experience which takes place at the end of Year 12. They ensure that placements match the qualifications students are aiming for and their career aspirations.

- Since the last inspection, leaders have put in place more rigorous systems for monitoring the attendance and punctuality of sixth-form students. Both attendance and punctuality have improved considerably and are now good.
- Staff provide a high level of care for all students in the sixth form, including those who have SEN and/or disabilities. External reviews of the BTEC National Diploma and provision for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities praise the sixth form's 'inclusive climate for learning'.
- The same high standards of safeguarding evident for pupils in Years 7 to 11 are in evidence in the sixth form. Taking account of students' increased levels of maturity and independence, staff ensure that students know how to keep themselves safe from physical and emotional harm.
- Students enjoy participating in the wide variety of enrichment activities which staff provide for them. These include residential experiences abroad and the opportunity to gain accreditation from schemes such as The Duke of Edinburgh's Award.
- Within the local area there are several post-16 institutions which are in a better position to offer a wide variety of A levels. They attract the most able Birchwood students at the end of Year 11. Leaders have decided to meet the needs of their students and secure the long-term viability of the sixth form by offering a reduced number of A-level courses. These have been chosen to complement applied and general qualifications, which are a significant and long-standing strength of the school.

School details

Unique reference number	139840
Local authority	Warrington
Inspection number	10045845

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

Type of school	Secondary comprehensive
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	11 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	954
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	154
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair	Andrea Atherton
Headteacher	Moira Bryan
Telephone number	01925 853500
Website	www.birchwoodhigh.org/
Email address	contactus@birchwoodhigh.org
Date of previous inspection	4 May 2016

Information about this school

- Birchwood Community High School is an average-sized secondary school.
- The proportion of pupils supported by pupil premium funding is a little lower than average.
- The proportion of pupils from ethnic minority groups is lower than the national average.
- The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is lower than average.

- The proportion of pupils who receive support for SEN and/or disabilities is small in comparison with the national figure. The proportion of pupils who have an education, health and care plan is a little higher than the national average.
- For a small number of pupils the school uses alternative provision at New Horizons, Warrington.
- The school has received support from Formby High School and St Hilda's High School as well as the local-authority hub for subject leaders.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors visited classrooms to observe teaching and pupils' learning. Some of these lesson observations were carried out jointly with senior leaders.
- Inspectors observed and spoke to pupils during lessons and at breaktimes.
- Inspectors met formally with four groups of pupils. An inspector heard a range of pupils read. There was only one response to Ofsted's questionnaire for pupils.
- Inspectors held discussions with staff, middle and senior leaders. They took account of 46 responses to Ofsted's questionnaire for staff.
- Inspectors had discussions with members of the board of trustees and governing body and the school's independent school improvement adviser.
- Inspectors took account of a range of documentation, including arrangements for safeguarding. They took account of the school's information about pupils' outcomes and scrutinised pupils' books and assessment information.
- Inspectors considered 127 responses to Parent View (Ofsted's online questionnaire), including 68 free-text comments.

Inspection team

Liz Kelly, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
Craig Yates	Ofsted Inspector
Jan Rowney	Ofsted Inspector
Linda Griffiths	Ofsted Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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