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Dear Dr Wright

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: modern languages

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 9 and 10 November 2010 to look at work in modern languages.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of 10 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of modern languages is good with some outstanding features.

Achievement in languages

Achievement in languages is good.

- When compared with national averages, students' attainment in GCSE in 2010 was in line with the national average for grades A* to C in German and Spanish, an improvement on 2009. Although it remained below the national average in French where staff absence affected outcomes, the large majority of students took one or more languages, well above the national figure. All students entered attained a A* to G grade. Alternative accreditation at Levels 1 and 2 was also used. Overall, languages performed better than other subjects in the school.
- The results in speaking were weaker than in other skills.

- Attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 was in line with expectations.
- In the sixth form, attainment was broadly average, in line with other subjects.
- Students mostly make good progress in lessons because the quality of teaching and learning is at least good and teachers ensure that learning objectives are met.
- Younger students are beginning to have an understanding of different grammatical concepts and older ones are getting to grips with complex grammatical functions, such as the imperfect subjunctive mood in Spanish. Where teaching focuses well on speaking, students respond very well, talking not only on the topic but also more spontaneously, such as in a Year 10 French GCSE lesson. Students have good pronunciation and intonation and lessons focus well on these aspects of communication.
- Students are very aware of the usefulness of learning languages and brought it up quickly in conversation. They are proud to attend a language college and said that their parents and carers were very supportive of them learning languages: 'We chat over breakfast'.
- On the whole, students are keen, committed and very enthusiastic language learners.

Quality of teaching in languages

The quality of teaching in languages is good with outstanding features.

- Teachers have very good subject knowledge and methodology, which, aligned with a passion for languages and high expectations, ensures students make good progress.
- Lessons are very well planned to achieve learning outcomes and executed very well so that students achieve the language skills planned. Each lesson also focuses well on skills, such as group and collaborative work as well as some independent work.
- Some of the best lessons enable students to talk in the target language, to understand grammatical concepts in context, such as connectives through reading, and to see how they can make progress. Several teachers used assessment very well for learning to ensure that students understood throughout the lesson.
- Students said they use information and communication technology regularly and that it is helpful for improving their languages. They use it among other things for listening activities, podcasts, and writing for accuracy.
- Use of authentic resources for reading and research were not in evidence. Students said that the text book was used mostly and that reading authentic material, such as newspapers, would be an improvement.
- Students were very complimentary of all the support staff give them and said that lessons were often such that they did not want to finish.

- However, not all marking is as useful as it could be. Some of it is very good suggesting helpful improvements and targets written out at the front of books, and even pyramids of progress. Some is much less helpful with few comments and no targets.

Quality of the curriculum in languages

The quality of the curriculum in languages is outstanding.

- The curriculum is planned well to meet the needs of learners. It is compiled thoughtfully so that assessment is tackled in schemes of work. There are policies on major areas of learning such as the use of the target language and information and communication technology.
- The time on the timetable for the languages studied is suitable.
- French, Spanish, German, Chinese and Russian are core provision. Polish is provided during the day on Fridays or a lunchtime club. Home languages are encouraged in Year 10 to give students experience of the English examination system. Students with other heritage languages, 14 last year, are supported in accessing qualifications.
- Chinese is provided in Year 9 after school, and in Key Stage 4 it is provided both after school and on the timetable. Russian is provided after school. As a result, it is possible for students to study three languages from age 14.
- On Saturdays and/or Sundays, Arabic and Chinese are catered for. The school has Confucius Classroom status. A Russian supplementary school is due to start next academic year.
- There are significant numbers of dual language learners in Key Stage 3 and 4. At least 80 students are taking languages in the sixth form, of which eight learn more than one language. In Key Stage 3, a large proportion of students start a second language at half term in Year 7. Although these are mostly higher attaining students, the school has flexible arrangements to accommodate students who want to join in.
- In Key Stage 4, the school has gone beyond GCSE qualifications and now offers NVQs, Asset Languages qualifications and Business Chinese. It is looking to offer alternative Level 3 accreditation in the sixth form.
- One of its strengths is the many trips and exchanges organised for each language including work experience in Spain and France in Year 10. These link to the school's International School Award (ISA) which it has now received three times. Students appreciate these opportunities very much.
- Students' attitudes to languages are a testament to such a high-quality curriculum and the effort languages staff give to specialist college status and the ISA.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in languages

The effectiveness of the leadership and management in languages is good.

- You are very supportive of the school's development of languages and are aware of its steady improvements in recent years. Your line management of this area enables you to quality assure its developments and you work with the subject leader/director of the language college.
- Subject leadership is good; self-evaluation is astute but the department improvement plan is not yet in a format which shows how priorities will be tackled, by whom and when.
- Monitoring and observations of teaching and learning to ensure lessons include speaking are key priorities which the department takes seriously.
- Older students think that guidance is insufficient beyond the languages department to ensure that students know about the substantial advantages for their future economic well-being in taking one or more languages beyond the age of 16.
- The work with the community is excellent, for example with the local feeder primary schools to enable them to provide a modern language. The department used this latter initiative to help students who learn one in Key Stage 2 to make the best progress they can in Year 7. The subject leader and department are also involved in numerous local, regional and national initiatives to support language learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- further improving attainment in GCSE grades A* to C, particularly in French, and improving the consistency of marking across languages
- broadening resources for reading, providing authentic materials and using the internet for more research in the target languages
- ensuring that the ethos of the school encourages students to take a language in sixth form and that they understand that they will have wider opportunities in life beyond school if they do so.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop languages in the school.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. Except in the case of academies, a copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Pam Haezewindt
Her Majesty's Inspector