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10 November 2010

Mr S McKenna
Headteacher
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Dear Mr McKenna

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: history

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 18 and 19 October 2010 to look at work in history.

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 nine lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history is good.

Achievement in history

Achievement in history is good.

- In recent years, while students' attainment has generally been above average, not enough students have achieved the highest GCSE grades given their above average starting points. However, current students are making good progress and in external modular examinations, over 60% of current Year 11 students have achieved grades A* to A. This represents good and rapidly improving achievement.
- Similarly, while progress in the sixth form has previously been satisfactory, students currently in Year 13 are achieving well, with far higher proportions attaining grades A to B in their AS modules than in previous years.
- Students across the year groups develop very good knowledge and understanding of historical topics studied in depth. They also develop good

historical skills particularly in interrogating the value of historical evidence, in making judgements about causation, and in communicating about the past through extended writing.

- History makes an excellent contribution to students' personal development. Their enjoyment of history is reflected by higher than average student take-up at GCSE and A level. Students invariably work well in lessons and behaviour is often outstanding. Older students are passionate about history's importance as a discipline which deepens their understanding of the human condition and the modern world. All students appreciate history's value in equipping them with a wide range of important skills.

Quality of teaching in history

The quality of teaching in history is good.

- Teachers use their excellent subject knowledge to plan lessons which are stimulating and engaging. Lessons commonly include a good range of activities, including independent, paired and group work. In a minority of lessons, opportunities are sometimes missed to present students with really challenging activities that test their ability to formulate, share and check their own hypotheses in response to challenging historical questions.
- Lesson planning is detailed and thorough, reflecting teachers' professionalism. The quality of teaching in history is highly regarded by students. They value their teachers' commitment and dedication and their willingness to help them if they need additional support. This, together with consistently good teaching, helps to explain the extremely positive relationships between staff and students.
- Marking in the examination classes is extremely effective in helping students to identify their strengths and weaknesses and providing guidance on how they can improve. While day-to-day marking is completed conscientiously and regularly during Key Stage 3, it is less sharply focused on the development of subject-specific skills. This is because the use of assessment criteria is less well refined in Key Stage 3 than for older students. As a result, younger students are less confident in understanding the key components which make learning effective in history.
- Teachers know their students well and plan very carefully to meet the needs of students who require additional support. On occasions, the success criteria established for less-able students is not sufficiently challenging.

Quality of the curriculum in history

The quality of the curriculum in history is good.

- Students benefit from a good range of courses which covers a broad spectrum of historical topics and periods. Older students, including girls in

the shared sixth form, value the contrast between the topics studied at GCSE and A level.

- The history curriculum for younger students has been adapted well in response to the two-year Key Stage 3 programme recently introduced by the school. Students in Years 7 and 8 receive two hours of history lessons each week and the time is used well to develop their understanding of a good range of topics in depth. However, the curriculum does not yet provide sufficient opportunities for students to develop their historical understanding through overview and thematic studies.
- Effective and challenging assessment procedures encourage the development of students' skills, particularly in explaining cause and consequence, in interrogating historical evidence and in developing extended writing. However, these are not yet fully linked to the key concepts and processes set out in the revised National Curriculum.
- History is enhanced through good provision for enrichment, for example, through visits to sites of historical interest, such as Rochester Castle, the battlefields of the First World War and museums, such as the RAF Museum at Hendon and the National Army Museum.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in history

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

- The new curriculum leader has already had a clear impact in raising achievement in history, particularly the proportion of students attaining the highest grades at GCSE and in the sixth form. Significant changes to the curriculum at Key Stages 4 and 5 have been managed well and schemes of work are comprehensive and well organised.
- The history department benefits from teachers' shared determination to secure the best possible outcomes for students. Teachers collaborate well to share resources and ideas and to support non-specialists who teach history. Teachers' commitment to their own continuing professional development is reflected by the department's long-standing support for the Graduate Teaching Programme.
- Self-evaluation is accurate and has helped inform strategies to increase achievement and attainment.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- increasing the proportion of outstanding lessons by extending opportunities for students to formulate, share and test their own hypotheses in response to complex historical questions
- providing more opportunities for younger students to develop their historical understanding through thematic and overview studies
- ensuring that assessment procedures at Key Stage 3 develop students' understanding of the full range of key concepts and processes in history.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop history 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

Daniel Burton
Her Majesty's Inspector