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Mr M Kerr
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Kerr

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: music

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit with Fiona Arnison, additional inspector, on 19 and 20 October 2010 to look at work in music.

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 learners; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of three curriculum lessons, individual pupils' singing and flute lessons, and a rehearsal of the Glee Club.

The overall effectiveness of music is inadequate. Significant weaknesses in the curriculum provision limit the breadth and depth of students' musical development. While you are right to recognise the efforts and enthusiasm of the subject leader in reordering the music area and in ensuring that teaching is professionally organised, the focus on students' musical understanding in curriculum lessons is insufficient. Standards are low in every area of musical experience.

Achievement in music

Achievement in music is inadequate.

- In Key Stage 3, standards are low. The curriculum provides insufficient opportunities for students to understand music from different traditions, genres and styles. Students do not make enough progress in developing their knowledge of musical techniques, structures and devices as they progress from Year 7 to Year 9.

- The proportion of students opting for music in Key Stage 4 varies from broadly in line to below average. While an improvement on 2008, standards at GCSE remained low in 2009 and 2010. On average, the 2010 cohort achieved over a grade below their expected results. Scrutiny of current Year 11 students' work revealed similarly low standards and inadequate progress. Composing work lacks musical depth and not enough attention is paid to planning, recording, and notating students' compositions.
- The proportion of students participating in additional instrumental or vocal lessons is extremely low. Less than one in every 50 students participates in extra-curricular music.
- No curriculum courses are offered in the sixth form and very few sixth-form students take an active role in school music.

Quality of teaching in music

The quality of teaching in music is inadequate.

- Curriculum lessons are highly organised and resources are managed efficiently. However, significant proportions of lessons are spent talking about what students are expected to do, or about how their work will be assessed, rather than actually making music or actively developing their musical understanding. Too much emphasis is placed on procedural matters or on students' social group-work skills, and not enough attention is given to improving their musical skills. There is not nearly enough musical direction in curriculum lessons through demonstrating and leading performing or composing work.
- Recordings are not made regularly or used systematically to help students to understand the quality of their work and what they need to do to improve. Questioning is not used effectively in listening activities because misconceptions are not followed up nor misunderstandings corrected.
- Better teaching was seen in individual instrumental and vocal lessons observed. For example, in a flute lesson where constant modelling, supported by well-chosen but sparing verbal instructions, helped the student to make good progress.

Quality of the curriculum in music

The quality of the curriculum in music is inadequate.

- Since September 2010, temporary reductions in staffing have resulted in Key Stage 3 students only receiving one lesson of music each fortnight. This is insufficient time for students to experience an adequate breadth and depth of musical experiences or to maintain satisfactory progress in their musical development.
- The head of department is rewriting the Key Stage 3 scheme of work. While there is a broad outline overview across the three years, this does not give a sufficient indication of the increasing musical standards that students are expected to achieve over three years. Currently only one unit of work is planned in any depth for each year group.

- Similarly, the Key Stage 4 curriculum is only in very broad outline, with very few units of work planned in any detail.
- Although there are 10 computer workstations in the department, these are not used for creating music. As a result, statutory requirements are not met and opportunities are missed to widen access and enjoyment of music through the use of information and communication technology (ICT).
- There is a choir and the Glee Club, and a rock school is offered on one evening each week. However, take-up for these groups is very small, and students have no other opportunities to play instruments in ensemble. Students also have few opportunities to understand the world of professional music through workshops and concert visits, and this is an area that they would particularly like to experience.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in music

The effectiveness of the leadership and management in music is inadequate.

- The head of department has been in post for just over two years. Students and senior staff report that a clear difference has been made in improving the organisation of resources and image of the department. However, there is still more to do before the curriculum adequately promotes satisfactory progress and appropriate musical standards for students.
- Self-evaluation is honest in recognising that standards are low and that students do not make enough progress in music. However, the musical reasons for these outcomes are not analysed and the significance of the weak curriculum has not been recognised sufficiently.
- Although there is sound understanding of the generic features of good teaching and learning – for example, lesson planning and the principles of assessment – understanding of current issues in music education is very limited. This includes senior leaders, and a key area for improvement is to provide support for senior leaders so that they can better challenge and support the music department.
- Although the school is aware of the instrumental and vocal initiatives in primary schools, and that some feeder primary schools benefit from these initiatives, not enough is done to build on students' prior experiences of music when they join Year 7.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that, by September 2011, sufficient time is given throughout Key Stage 3 so that students experience an appropriately broad and deep music curriculum, including the use of ICT, and that the curriculum in both Key Stages 3 and 4 is planned in sufficient detail to promote good progress in students' musical development and understanding
- significantly increasing the proportions of students benefiting from additional instrumental and vocal tuition, and participating in extra-curricular musical activities, including through more effectively building on the prior experiences of students in their primary schools

- improving the quality of curriculum lessons with increased understanding of the features of good musical teaching and learning, through external support not only for music staff but also for senior school leaders to help them better monitor and challenge provision and outcomes.

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

Mark Phillips
Her Majesty's Inspector