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Dear Mr Owers

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: modern languages (ML)

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 14 and 15 February 2011 to look at work in ML.

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 eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML is outstanding.

Achievement in languages

Achievement in languages is outstanding.

- The percentage of all students attaining A* and A and A* to C grades at GCSE is consistently high, as is the proportion of students entered for a language. In 2010, students performed significantly better in French and Spanish than in other subjects. This difference was less pronounced in German. Students make consistently good progress from their starting points in Year 7 and the school's detailed tracking data indicate that students in the current Year 11 are also on track to meet their challenging targets.
- Students make good progress at AS level in all languages. In 2010, progress at A level was good in French but less strong in German because

of some underperformance in writing. This has been well addressed by the school.

- Students make good gains in learning in lessons. The majority of students understand the importance of languages and older students in particular are developing very good intercultural understanding. The vast majority of students are self-motivated and are responding well to the school's drive to make them more reflective, independent learners. Some lower attaining students require more support in this process. Behaviour seen during the inspection was at least good, although students say that occasionally some classes are disrupted by a small number of their peers being off task.
- Students' written work shows that their use of language develops very well over the years. They write in an extended way from Year 7 and, by the end of Key Stage 4, their work shows that students can apply their grammatical knowledge very well and use a broad and varied range of vocabulary. Some higher attaining students in Year 11 are working at levels commensurate with AS level. In the sixth form, students quickly learn to engage with complex ideas. Listening and reading skills are very well developed.
- The majority of students say that they find speaking the most difficult skill and evidence of this was seen in lessons. At GCSE level, and below, students can speak with accuracy and sometimes at length, but are not yet confident in speaking spontaneously without a written prompt. The department is aware of this and considerable work is being done on this at the moment, particularly in Spanish and French. In the sixth form, students perceived this as the skill in which they gain most in confidence. Speaking is supported very well by additional work with foreign language assistants.

Quality of teaching in languages

The quality of teaching in languages is good.

- Teachers' subject knowledge is very strong and they present excellent models of the ML to their students. Their consistently effective use of the target language supports higher level listening skills very well.
- Teachers have responded well to the challenge of the longer lessons and plan carefully to ensure that they are broken up into a number of episodes which include a variety of activities. They make good use of a range of attractive and well-prepared resources including authentic materials and very focused use of information and communication technology. Very good use was made in one lesson of video conferencing to stimulate real communication. Students in the sixth form are exposed to a very broad range of authentic resources.
- Teachers make very good use, particularly at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form, of their knowledge of their students to differentiate work. This approach is used very effectively in all three languages to ensure that writing and reading tasks are well matched to the students' needs. This approach is less consistent in the development of more independent

speaking skills. Outstanding practice in this area, however, was seen in a Spanish lesson in which students were also involved heavily in thinking about how they were learning.

- Marking is regular and careful but the level of diagnostic marking and target-setting is rather variable, particularly in Key Stage 3. Students know, however, how well they are doing.
- Students talk warmly about their teachers' passion and creativity and one student told the inspector: 'some of the best teachers in the school are language teachers.'

Quality of the curriculum in languages

The quality of the curriculum in languages is outstanding.

- The school has promoted the policy of languages for all very well. A very good level of flexibility in the curriculum allows for two or even three languages to be studied and for early entry. The school is being proactive in considering how early entry might be extended to the whole cohort in Key Stage 4, as part of the drive to capture achievement at an earlier age and to increase uptake in the sixth form.
- Schemes of work are very well matched to students' needs and the Year 7 transition programme is particularly effective in building on students' primary language learning.
- The level of enrichment is outstanding both within the school and as extra-curricular opportunities. There are, for example, exchanges for all three languages, clubs, language days, cross-curricular projects and even opportunities for sixth formers to teach parents. Good linguists value the opportunities the school offers. One such student commented that perhaps it would be better, if those to whom languages did not come easy had more opportunities to see how important languages could be.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in languages

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

- You provide strong support to ML. The subject has a high profile in the school and languages teachers have been at the forefront of the school's drive to encourage students to have greater involvement with their learning. There are strong links between ML and the school's specialist subject, humanities. The head of ML has a clear vision for the subject, uses the skills of the team very well and encourages innovation.
- The department exploits a wide range of links with external bodies to enrich their own work and to share their expertise with others. In her role as an advanced skills teacher, the head of ML has worked extensively with primary teachers and this has informed the approach of the department to Year 7, as well as establishing and supporting primary ML in the authority.

- Self-evaluation is very well considered and based securely on the analysis of data. Students' progress is carefully monitored, interventions put in place and the impact of these interventions on students' subsequent performance is analysed. Support for the sharing of practice across the department is very good and effective use is made of the school's intranet to share resources. The monitoring of teaching leads to detailed and constructive feedback, but observations are not regular enough to be really developmental.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- developing spontaneous speaking skills throughout Key Stages 3 and 4
- ensuring that all students have opportunities to see how important languages could be in their lives.

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

Anne Looney
Her Majesty's Inspector