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Mrs J Gray
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Dear Mrs Gray

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 25 and 26 January 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 five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML is good.

Achievement in languages

Achievement in languages is good.

- Standards in languages are good throughout the school. The percentage of all students attaining A* to C grades and A* to G grades is consistently well above the national average and corresponds to the school's commitment, as a specialist language college, to languages for all. However, success in the different languages is more variable. The first two cohorts of students taking Mandarin Chinese have performed well. In French, the proportion of students attaining A* and A grades as well as A* to C grades has remained consistently above average over the last three years. Results in Spanish in 2010, however, indicated a drop in performance after two years of above average attainment. Although staffing disruption had a considerable impact on this cohort, the school

has analysed the examination outcomes well and is putting in place strategies to improve speaking and coursework writing which were identified as the weakest skills. The school's current detailed data show that students are on track to meet their challenging targets in Spanish and French. Numbers taking a language in the sixth form are too small for data to be reliable.

- Students make good gains in learning in lessons. They like languages and the vast majority respond well and try hard in class, particularly when lessons are lively and the pace is right. Some students say that occasionally, the pace is too fast or the work too hard and they get demotivated. Older students talk well about the importance of languages for communication and careers and all students show a good intercultural understanding. Students analyse well which skills they find the easiest and hardest and can discuss about activities that help them learn best.
- Listening skills are good although, occasionally, their development is impeded by the amount of English used in the classroom. Students listen well to models of the language and, as a result, pronunciation and intonation are good in all three core languages. Students' speaking skills are secure but they lack confidence when they have had insufficient chance to practise. They read well and show good comprehension skills. Students write well from an early stage and writing becomes more sophisticated as students progress through the school. Students in Year 12 feel that they have made good progress in their speaking and writing in terms of range and content.

Quality of teaching in languages

The quality of teaching in languages is good.

- Lessons are planned for variety of skill practice and teachers make good use of technology to present and practise language and make equally good use of a range of authentic and attractive paper materials. Adults other than teachers are deployed well.
- Lessons have clear learning objectives but the level of detail in the planning is not always sufficient to support an approach which guarantees that language skills are developed systematically, particularly with regard to speaking. In one lesson, however, there was a very good example of students working with their learning or 'talk' partners on the new language and this gave them a high level of confidence to answer in whole-class sessions.
- Students' needs are identified clearly in plans but some inconsistency exists in the clarity about what activities teachers will use to meet those needs or how teachers will assess that those needs have been met.
- Teachers' subject knowledge is good and they present a good model of the target language to their students. Some excellent use of modelling in one French lesson was seen but teachers' use of the target language is not consistent.

- Students are involved well in the assessment of their learning in lessons and all know the level at which they are working. Marking of their written work is regular but the level of guidance on how to improve varies. It is better for students from Key Stage 4 onwards and for those learning French where some very good examples of diagnostic marking were seen.
- Working relationships in classrooms are good and students value the hard work of their teachers.

Quality of the curriculum in languages

The quality of the curriculum in languages is outstanding.

- The school has promoted diversification of language provision very well by ensuring that the core curriculum contains two European languages and Mandarin Chinese. This core provision is further enhanced by an extensive and popular range of extra-curricular languages at a number of levels which allows for students to become dual or even triple linguists. Students value the language learning opportunities which the specialist college status offers.
- Particularly good use is made of students' home languages to extend their language learning skills and examination accreditation.
- Schemes of work provide a very good level of guidance on what to teach and how to assess and the Key Stage 3 curriculum is well informed by primary experience of its students.
- The school has been involved in a range of cross-curricular projects which enriches languages classroom provision.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in languages

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

- Good support is provided by the senior leadership team, and through the line management structure in particular. Senior leaders and the head of department have an accurate picture of strengths and areas for improvement in the languages department.
- The profile of languages in the school is high: they play a key role in the school's development planning; the head of department is involved in a school improvement group and she also acts as a lead teacher within the authority. Community links and links with primary schools are strong.
- The head of department provides good guidance to the team. The departmental development plan is comprehensive and has appropriate targets but there is too little emphasis on the impact on learners, and groups of learners, of actions to be taken.
- Students' progress is monitored well and systems are well understood. The monitoring of classroom practice, however, is too informal.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that teachers model more in the target language rather than explaining in English what students are to do
- making more consistent use of learning partners as a means of providing oral practice
- planning in detail how the needs of all groups of learners will be met and establishing how this will be assessed
- monitoring teaching more rigorously and evaluating the impact of the teaching on all students' progress.

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