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Mr J Clarke
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Clarke

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 7 and 8 March 2011 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 seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history is satisfactory.

Achievement in history

Achievement in history is satisfactory.

- Students make satisfactory progress although their attainment remains low at the end of Key Stage 4. Tracking data indicate that predictions for 2011 are higher than this time last year, though they are still below national averages for history. Students in the sixth form attain broadly average results and make satisfactory progress. No discernible difference exists between the performance of different groups of students.
- Sixth-form students have a good grasp of some of their topics of study, such as Vietnam, but the level of challenge to attain the highest grades is inconsistent across modules. Key Stage 4 students extend their knowledge and understanding of the modern world adequately but some aspects of their understanding of key concepts, such as interpretation, is being developed more slowly.

- Students' historical skills are developed adequately at both Key Stages 4 and 5. Students are aware that we know about the past through written and other forms of evidence but they are less sure about how to assess the validity and reliability of sources.
- Students' writing and arguing skills are being developed satisfactorily through the study of history. In the sixth form, one lesson demonstrated good development of debating skills about the nature of Khrushchev's leadership. More able students can write at greater length than their peers but the level of challenge to enable them to secure the highest grades is inconsistent across lessons. Students' skills in information and communication technology are being developed satisfactorily through history. Some students in the sixth form take notes using laptops.
- Students' behaviour is good. They work well together in groups and the majority can work well on their own. They sustain their focus on the tasks set when engaged fully in the activities.

Quality of teaching in history

The quality of teaching in history is satisfactory.

- A reasonable range of learning activities is planned for the different abilities of the students. There is good practice in some lessons, but the level of challenge for more able students is not consistently good across the school. Students say that they are sometimes bored when the teacher talks for too long.
- In the good lessons, activities are well paced with an efficient use of time. Students respond well to the structured activities and to the brisk pace of the learning.
- Teachers use good quick-fire questions to elicit accurate responses from students, but sometimes opportunities are missed to allow students time to reflect and to give reasons for their answers.
- Students say that they enjoy their learning when tasks are stimulating, such as when they make models or work together to create make decisions on issues. Most valued the visits they undertake to places of historical interest.
- Students' work is marked regularly but there are too few guidance comments to enable students to know clearly how to improve their work.

Quality of the curriculum in history

The quality of the curriculum in history is satisfactory.

- The curriculum meets requirements. Students study an appropriate range of topics in Key Stage 3.
- The history curriculum has recently been reviewed in order to improve grades at Key Stage 4 and 5. It is too early to see the impact of these changes.

- Students enjoy studying the subject and their experiences are broadened through a limited number of visits to historical sites.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in history

Leadership and management in history are satisfactory.

- The head of department provides satisfactory leadership and direction for the subject. He has a good understanding of requirements and is well aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the subject.
- The head of department monitors provision through discussions with staff and scrutinising students' work when appropriate. However, he does not undertake enough formal observations of lessons. A new discussion group for history teachers has been created in order to share good practice, but this has not yet had time to impact on improving the quality of teaching so that it becomes consistently good.
- Documentation for the subject is adequate and appropriate schemes of work have been drawn up.
- The head of department has not been able to attend any training in history for quite some time, but others have attended training run by examination boards. This is helping to improve teachers' understanding of what is required of students at Key Stage 5.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the monitoring of teaching and learning to:
 - ensure that the level of challenge for the more able students is consistently high across lessons
 - ensure that the marking of students' work indicates clearly how they can make improvements to attain better results.

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

Peter Limm
Her Majesty's Inspector