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Mr S Common
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Common

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 nine lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history is good.

Achievement in history

Achievement in history is good.

- While achievement at the end of Key Stage 4 has been satisfactory in recent years, students currently in Years 10 and 11 are making good progress. Strategies to address boys' underachievement are proving to be successful with the result that over 85% of all Year 11 students, including 80% of boys, have secured grades A* to C in the two history modules completed so far. Similarly, the proportion of boys securing the highest GCSE grades is rising quickly having previously been too low. Girls achieve consistently well.
- Outcomes for sixth-form students are good. High pass rates, excellent in-year retention and satisfactory achievement demonstrate that success rates are good. While the proportion of students attaining the highest grades has fluctuated from year to year, validated AS results indicate that

Year 13 students are on track to meet targets which are significantly above those achieved in previous years.

- Most students make good progress in Key Stage 3, and some make outstanding progress. Students develop excellent knowledge and understanding of local, national and international history and have a sophisticated understanding of how the past fits together. Students are also very skilled in using historical evidence to support their judgements about the past.
- In some lessons, some learners make less progress than others because teachers are not sufficiently mindful of the impact of their teaching on the progress of all groups of learners, particularly those who find history more challenging.
- History makes an outstanding contribution to students' personal development. The curriculum ensures that students have an excellent understanding of history's relevance to their own lives. This, in part, explains the subject's popularity in the school. Twice as many students opt to study history in Key Stage 4 than seen nationally.

Quality of teaching in history

The quality of teaching in history is good.

- Teaching benefits from teachers' exceptional dedication and first-class subject expertise. They are constantly striving to find ways to improve their practice to ensure that lessons are always engaging, challenging and varied.
- Relationships between staff and students are excellent, not least because students recognise the time and commitment their teachers devote to preparing high-quality lessons. Older students, in particular, are extremely mindful of their teachers' willingness to give them extra-curricular support as they prepare for examinations.
- Less strong is teachers' use of assessment to ensure that learning fully meets the needs of the whole group, particularly those who find history more challenging. Linked to this, in some lessons, teachers do not make sufficient use of assessment to check how well everyone is doing at each stage of the lesson.
- In some lessons, extended periods of teacher talk slow the pace of learning and fail to secure the full engagement of all members of the group. On occasions, starter activities - though well devised - go on for too long, inhibiting students' ability to engage sufficiently quickly in the main lesson activity.
- Marking is good and older students report that high-quality formative feedback has been instrumental in helping them to improve in history. In Key Stage 3, opportunities are missed to capitalise on teachers' detailed marking by ensuring that it is consistently linked to agreed, understood and timely personal targets.

Quality of the curriculum in history

The quality of the curriculum in history is outstanding.

- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is a model of excellent practice and ensures that students have superb understanding of how the history of the local community fits into wider British, European and World history. It has been informed by teachers' determination that history should be meaningful and relevant to all groups of students. Their commitment to recognising, interrogating and celebrating diversity is exemplified by the Key Stage 3 curricular project on the Ipswich Caribbean Association.
- The Key Stage 4 curriculum has also been modified as part of a wider strategy to raise boys' achievement. The GCSE coursework module devised by the school is highly innovative. These changes, together with a much sharper focus on examination preparation in lessons, are having a marked impact in raising attainment and achievement.
- A-level students report how much they enjoy the rich variety of courses they study in Years 12 and 13. Staff have ensured that the curriculum is well matched to students' interests and have changed one of the A-level modules in response to students' feedback.
- The curriculum in all key stages is underpinned by challenging, intriguing and controversial questions. These help create a clear sense of purpose in lessons and ensure that lessons are informed by a strong sense of historical enquiry.
- An excellent range of trips and visits is integrated into the curriculum extremely well. For example, the visit to the National Arboretum in Staffordshire underpins the Key Stage 3 project on remembrance.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in history

Leadership and management in history are good.

- Revised leadership and management arrangements have improved the department's capacity to build on its strengths and tackle areas of relative weakness. The results of these changes can already be seen in the very significant improvement in students' progress in Key Stage 4.
- Staff form an extremely cohesive unit. They work extremely well together, willingly sharing lesson ideas, resources and examples of best practice. The department benefits from the expertise of two advanced skills teachers, whose work resonates across the department and in the wider school and local community.
- Self-evaluation is accurate and used well to improve provision. However, not all targets in the departmental development plan are sufficiently linked to clearly measurable outcomes for students.
- While younger students are given appropriate end of key stage targets, the impact of target-setting in accelerating achievement in Key Stage 3 is inhibited by the lack of shorter-term subject-specific targets.

- Lesson observations are used well to highlight teachers' individual strengths and areas for development. Leaders and managers recognise that observations of teaching and learning and regular work scrutinies now need to focus more explicitly on the impact of teaching on all groups of learners, and particularly those who are achieving less well in history.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that more lessons secure outstanding progress for all groups of students by:
 - strengthening teachers' use of assessment to ensure that activities fully meet the needs of the whole group and secure good and better progress for everyone in the class
 - making lesson observations and work scrutinies focus on the impact of teaching on individuals and different groups of learners, particularly those who are achieving less well 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