

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mrs H L Aaron
Acting Headteacher
Wentworth High School
Wentworth Road
Eccles
Manchester
M30 9BP

Dear Mrs Aaron

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: modern languages

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 21 and 22 March 2011 to look at work in modern languages.

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 modern languages is good.

Achievement in languages

Achievement in languages is good.

- In both Spanish and French, attainment is above average at the end of both key stages. In Spanish, standards are high and students' achievement is outstanding. Attainment has improved significantly in French over the past year and is now approaching that in Spanish. In work seen, attainment is now above average in both languages and there is no significant difference in the performance of boys and girls or of different groups. In work seen in German in Year 9, students have a more limited range of language and structures than that seen in Spanish and French.
- Students are confident in the skills of writing and reading. They are less confident in listening and speaking. In Spanish, pronunciation and

intonation are good but in French, pronunciation is sometimes adversely affected by students' reliance on written notes. Students have a very good understanding of grammar and a good range of vocabulary and structures in both languages. They write at length and in detail for a variety of purposes, using a wide range of vocabulary and structures, linking their ideas together successfully and comparing and contrasting arguments, for example, in weighing up their progress towards a healthy diet or in discussing their views about school. They are able to access information from a variety of texts and use new language they have gleaned in this way to improve their own writing. For example, Year 7 students used bilingual dictionaries successfully to explain their opinions of school subjects in some detail.

- Students have very positive attitudes towards learning languages and have a very clear understanding of its importance. They are enthusiastic and confident linguists. They particularly enjoy games and problem-solving activities in the languages they are learning.

Quality of teaching in languages

The quality of teaching in languages is good.

- Teachers' command of the languages they teach is excellent. However, they do not always use the languages being learnt in lessons effectively. As a result, students' listening and speaking skills are not as well developed as they might be and opportunities are missed to challenge the more able linguists to interpret some unfamiliar or more complex language for others and develop higher-order listening skills. Teachers are sometimes too ready to translate instructions, both oral and written, thus eliminating the need for students to work out meaning for themselves.
- Students are regularly given the opportunity to develop their reading skills and use text well to increase their range of vocabulary and structures. They are routinely expected to work out the meaning of new language in reading activities. However, opportunities are missed to develop their listening skills by, for instance, predicting what they are going to hear or identifying key vocabulary and phrases that they might hear. As a result, some struggle to identify the main points and detail from extracts of speech.
- Teachers have high expectations of their students and provide good levels of challenge and support. They use a good variety of strategies to engage students and to enable them to build effectively on previous learning. Through the effective use of games and pair-work activities, for example, students develop confidence and independence in using the languages themselves.
- Teachers plan effectively for groups of differing ability. Activities are well sequenced and are usually conducted at a brisk pace. Students have frequent opportunities to learn from each other, practise informally and use the languages for real purposes with a partner.

- Teachers use assessment information very effectively to plan their lessons and to provide appropriate support and challenge for different groups of learners. Teachers use a variety of strategies to check understanding in lessons. Marking is thorough, encouraging and gives good guidance about how to improve. Students themselves are involved in evaluating their own work and in using the assessment criteria to plan next steps.
- Students receive good guidance and are well informed about the choices they make at the end of each key stage.

Quality of the curriculum in languages

The quality of the curriculum in languages is good.

- All students study French in Year 7 and either Spanish or German from Year 8 and all have access to both the languages they have studied in Key Stage 4. The provision is good for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities and for gifted and talented students. However, progress is slowed by the distribution of lessons across the two-week timetable, because there are sometimes long gaps between language lessons.
- Schemes of work ensure continuity and progression and clearly identify how work can be tailored to the needs of different groups.
- Links with other institutions and universities are well developed. Students have the opportunity to attend intensive language days at local universities, other schools and colleges.
- The department provides extra help at lunchtimes and after school, including in examination preparation. These sessions are well attended.
- Information and communication technology (ICT) is used in lessons very effectively to support and extend learning in all four skills and the department makes good use of its website to support and extend students' learning outside lessons. Students use ICT to extend their knowledge of the cultural aspects of the languages they are learning.
- Students benefit from their contact with native speakers to practise speaking and listening skills and to extend their knowledge of different cultures and current events.
- The school takes account of students' previous experience of learning languages and the recently introduced curriculum in Year 7 ensures continuity and progression. Although this is at the early stages of development, students are enthusiastic and are building very effectively on their previous experience of learning a variety of languages.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in languages

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

- You and the other senior leaders provide very strong support for modern languages and have a very clear commitment to enabling as many students as possible to continue their study of a language through Key Stage 4 and beyond, and for them to achieve as highly as possible.

- Monitoring and evaluation of the department's performance, both by the senior leadership team and by the department itself, are very thorough and clearly focused on raising standards. Students' progress is tracked very closely, underachievement is swiftly identified and this prompts intervention.
- The head of department provides clear direction. Teachers work well as a team and share ideas and best practice. As a result, there is generally a good level of consistency across the department and across languages.
- Take up in Key Stage 4 is good and increasing significantly year on year in both French and Spanish. A significant proportion of students studying Spanish and French to GCSE over the past three years has chosen to continue their studies of the languages post-16.
- There is a very clear rationale for learning modern languages which students understand and share. Teachers' enthusiasm for the languages they teach is clear.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving students' listening and speaking skills by increasing the use of the target language in lessons
- increasing opportunities for students to develop listening techniques and to use the language more frequently to gather and give information.

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

Judith Tolley
Additional Inspector