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Ms Edmonds
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Edmonds

Ofsted 2010–2011 survey inspection programme: assessing students' progress (APP)

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 22 September 2010 to evaluate the impact of the APP initiative.

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: a scrutiny of documentation; observations of teaching and learning; and discussions with senior leaders, other staff and students, and a representative of the local authority.

The overall use of assessment to support learning is good.

The APP initiative

Impact on students' achievement and attainment

- Achievement in the core subjects is better than in other areas of the school. This is associated with well developed and targeted assessment practice in those areas, such as APP.
- Students' attainment has improved steadily over recent years. You attribute this to prioritising good assessment practice across the school, including the use of APP in core subjects and APP-related developments in other subjects.

Impact on the quality of students' learning and progress

- The focus on students' progress in assessment and reporting systems is strong. You are aware of the need to drive up the attainment of some groups that underperform nationally. APP is used well to support a whole school vision of consistently good or better progress being central to securing the best outcomes for all students.
- APP has increased the importance of day-to-day assessment in lessons and encouraged students to reflect on their learning. It is helping them to become more resilient learners who are better prepared to tackle a wider range of challenges in the future. This degree of independence is more developed among older students.
- Problems associated with students' lack of mastery of subject-specific concepts are diminishing. This is attributed to the greater security with which teachers evaluate students' learning and their capacity to identify and tackle problems early.
- As a result of clear and well-understood assessment criteria, core subject teachers are building on students' prior learning more quickly and securely. This is helping to accelerate students' progress, particularly in Year 7. One teacher remarked, 'Before, a level 4 might have been achieved for a range of reasons. Now we know exactly what that level 4 means for every child.'
- As a result of the use of APP criteria, reports for parents are more clearly linked to students' progress in lessons. However, the technical language used does not always clarify what students must do to improve their work.

Impact on the quality of teaching and the use of assessment to support learning

- Leaders and managers make good use of APP to identify priorities for improving teaching and learning.
- The common language for assessment provided by APP is improving the quality of collaboration between teachers and subject teams. Your priority to facilitate these opportunities and the effective support offered by the local authority promote this approach strongly.
- Students appreciate the consistent use of appropriate learning objectives and success criteria in lessons and feel they receive clear guidance about how to improve their work.
- The quality of the feedback in some of the marking seen was impressive. For example, in English a common feedback sheet provides clear information on successes, targets and improvement strategies.
- The benefits of APP are more established in the systems to support good teaching than in teaching and learning methodology. For example, although APP has had some impact, effective questioning and opportunities for students to have choice and control in their learning are not evident in all lessons.

Impact on the curriculum

- You are committed to providing a curriculum that serves students' needs, and the information available about individuals and groups of students is being used well to personalise provision.
- Special curriculum provision for those that need it is better targeted and organised as a result of the higher quality information gathered through the use of APP.
- APP has had a positive influence on specific aspects of the curriculum. For example, the curriculum structure for English in Key Stage 3 has been strengthened and new approaches to practical work have been adopted in science.

Areas for development, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring reports for parents clarify what their children must do to achieve their targets
- using effective and consistent teaching and learning methods that support good assessment practice, for example, questioning and self-assessment.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop assessment practice to support school improvement.

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

Alan Taylor-Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector