

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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Mr M Hicks
Headteacher
Holyrood Academy
Zembard Lane
Chard
Somerset
TA20 1JL

Dear Mr Hicks

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: history

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 10 and 11 May 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 good.

Achievement in history

Achievement in history is good.

- Achievement is good across all key stages. Results in national tests are generally above average and the quality of learning and progress is good in lessons and over time. Although GCSE results dipped in 2010, an analysis of current performance demonstrates that any concerns have been successfully addressed.
- In the large majority of lessons observed, students made strong gains in developing their knowledge and understanding.
- Students benefit from opportunities to develop a good understanding of significance when judging the relative importance of a range of factors relating to an historical enquiry. For example, Year 8 students are able to draw interesting and thoughtful parallels when considering the influence of Thomas Paine during the American and French revolutions and in evaluating his importance with regard to equality and fairness today.

- Students are becoming increasingly adept at evaluating a range of sources to develop well-reasoned arguments and understand how and why interpretations change over time. For example, Year 9 students worked together well to construct a sophisticated understanding of the impact of the Dunkirk evacuation for Britons on the home-front.
- History makes a good contribution to students' personal development. Students demonstrate real enthusiasm for the subject and large numbers are choosing to study history at GCSE. They settle quickly to work and their behaviour in lessons is good. Students' cooperative approach to working together and with their teachers is a notable feature of lessons.

Quality of teaching in history

The quality of teaching in history is good.

- In most lessons, teachers use their good subject knowledge to plan learning activities which meet the needs of all students. Teachers show a real passion for history, and when teaching is most effective their love for the subject is reflected in high levels of student engagement.
- In a large majority of lessons, teachers create good opportunities for students to work in pairs and in teams to steer learning by developing ideas of their own and extending their historical skills. Occasionally, such opportunities are constrained by overly directed teaching and insufficient time for reflection.
- Where teaching is at its best, lessons are fast paced and underpinned by innovative and thought provoking enquiry questions. A good variety of activities in lessons and probing questioning are used to gauge and deepen students' understanding and promote their enjoyment. Students say how much they value the increasingly sophisticated use of new technologies to support learning and promote achievement.
- Marking and assessment are good though some variability exists within the department. The best practice is seen in the upper school, where precise subject-specific marking and dialogue clearly convey the next learning steps. However, opportunities are missed to capitalise on the significant potential of students to develop their own learning through the use of teachers' comments to reshape and/or refine historical skills.

Quality of the curriculum in history

The quality of the curriculum in history is good.

- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is built around innovative enquiry questions set within an engaging thematic approach. This deepens students' understanding especially when considering change and continuity across place and time. At Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form, detailed programmes of study have been developed which reflect examination requirements.
- The head of department recognises the need to monitor and evaluate the planning for progression in key historical skills and processes, including

sharing the criteria for success, to ensure that they are fully developed and made explicit in all lessons across the curriculum.

- Local history is used particularly well and students appreciate how it adds relevance to their study of national events. Students said how much they valued this aspect of the curriculum.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in history

The effectiveness of leadership and management in history is good.

- The head of department provides good leadership, clear direction and maintains high expectations of staff and students. His understanding of the department's strengths and areas for development is informed by effective self-evaluation. He is an outstanding classroom practitioner and has good plans in place to develop the work of the department further, especially with regard to ensuring consistency in teaching and learning.
- At Key Stage 4, students' progress is tracked regularly and their performance is carefully monitored so that additional support can be put in place when it is needed. As a result, attainment is improving because staff are better supported and challenged to tackle student underachievement.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving planning for progression so that teachers and students have a clear understanding of how they can develop the full range of key historical skills and processes across the curriculum
- ensuring that highly effective marking and assessment practice is applied consistently and to good effect across the department and that students routinely use feedback to improve their work with appropriate time given for reflection.

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

Karl Sampson
Her Majesty's Inspector