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30 June 2011

Mr R Whatmough
Principal
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Dear Mr Whatmough

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: art, craft and design

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 15 and 16 June 2011 to look at work in art, craft and design.

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 schools 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 parts of 11 lessons, including two which were jointly observed.

The overall effectiveness of art, craft and design is good.

Achievement in art, craft and design

Students' achievement in art, craft and design is good.

- The school's baseline assessment indicates that students' skills, knowledge, understanding and experience in the subject are average on entry. Students make satisfactory progress overall in Years 7 to 9. The new curriculum is helping to raise boys' performance compared to that of girls.
- An above average proportion of students choose an examination course in the subject. Taking into account the work of students currently in Years 10 and 11, and those who took their examinations in 2009 and 2010, standards are in line with the high national averages, or above.

- In the sixth form, students achieve high standards in predominantly two-dimensional media, underpinned by depth of reflection and evaluation, and presentation that sometimes meets professional standards. A high proportion progress to courses and careers related to the subject.
- As students progress through the school, particular strengths are students' skilled handling of digital media; their ability to revisit and refine ideas related to personal identity; their layout of images and information in sketchbooks; and their imagination, stemming from extensive 'mind mapping'.
- The quality of students' research into topics and creative practitioners past and present improves significantly from Year 10. Students' experiences, for example of art galleries, are recorded well in sketchbooks. Sometimes, final pieces have unrealised potential to progress into top grade work.
- The students interviewed expressed enjoyment of the subject, and those that have successfully pursued an Arts Award talked perceptively about personal development in and through the subject. Particularly in earlier years, students respond enthusiastically to questions in their lessons.
- There are good examples of effective mixed-media work, ranging from combinations of print and collage in Year 7 to installations in the sixth form. However, students' exploration of surface, structure and form is generally less well developed than their handling of visual composition.

Quality of teaching in art, craft and design

The quality of teaching in art, craft and design is good.

- Lesson observations, monitoring reports, assessments of students, their sketchbooks and work indicate that teaching is variable, but good overall. There is a good range of specialist expertise across the team, regular use of professional development and recent involvement in teacher training.
- Staff use information and communication technology very effectively to inform and inspire the students. Creative use of imagery and text makes high standards of presentation explicit. In one lesson, a sequence of slides enabled students to learn quickly about the teachers' methods as an artist.
- Students are well supported in developing specialist vocabulary. Where teaching is most effective, staff regularly check students' understanding. Thoughtfully considered prompts promote students' critical and writing skills, for example those focused on 'how to be an art detective'.
- Staff demonstrate good subject knowledge and encourage students to develop theirs. For example, 'artist of the month' is a regular feature of classroom displays. Some students expressed interest in knowing more about exhibitions and artists' studios to visit, locally and nationally.
- The balance between teacher exposition and intervention, and students' initiative and independence is an inconsistent aspect of lesson planning. The range of assessment information is not always used strategically, for example to set additional challenges or leadership tasks for the more able.

Quality of the curriculum in art, craft and design

The quality of the curriculum in art, craft and design is good.

- The curriculum capitalises on students' cultural interests while extending their awareness of art created in different times and places. Connections between the historical and contemporary were exemplified well in a lesson contrasting traditional African pattern with contemporary fashion design.
- A good range of options is available that enables students to gain accreditation by taking a general approach or by specialising in fine art, photography or graphics. Recent improvements to the Key Stage 3 curriculum ensure that students are able to make informed choices at 14.
- Opportunities for students to work with visiting artists, craftworkers and designers exist through enrichment activities, for example the annual arts festival. The school has visionary plans to work with the creative industries more regularly through the evolution of the 'Creative Exchange' on site.
- Topics enable students to draw on the natural and built environment, and aspects of human experience, regularly. Recent collaboration with the school's partner school promoted cohesion in the locality well through joint work with an artist in the context of the construction of a new bridge.
- Visits to local galleries in Key Stage 4, and national galleries in the sixth form are the norm. Although earlier experience of galleries is limited to a mixed picture of gallery visits in primary school, students are expected to make use of the school's developing virtual gallery and school exhibitions.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in art, craft and design

The effectiveness of leadership and management in art, craft and design is good.

- The vision for the subject expressed by the subject leader and senior leaders is ambitious, supported by appropriate prioritising and improvement planning. Departmental meetings clearly include regular opportunities to review changes, for example linked to the new curriculum.
- The subject leader, in his first year in post, has achieved considerable impact. However, he is aware that to sustain the brisk pace of improvement and embrace additional initiatives, the aims and objectives, and roles and responsibilities within the department require additional clarity.
- The development of a stunning photographic gallery in the school has strengthened the identity and raised the status of the subject. Imminent redevelopment of the studios that will integrate the head of department's teaching spaces more effectively with those of the rest of his team will support plans to ensure that best practice is consistent.
- Specialist status in media arts is reflected in the strengths of provision and outcomes, which are closely related to digital technology. The school website is developing as an excellent teaching and learning resource where examples of work by students and other artists are valued equally.

- Strong links with the local, educational and arts communities are developing and some are well established. For example, the school makes a significant contribution to the management of an annual exhibition of art work by children from across St Neots and the surrounding area.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- increasing the proportion of students attaining highest grades by:
 - developing students' confidence and creativity in handling three-dimensional media
 - enabling students to develop and apply independence and leadership skills in lessons and through follow-up challenges
 - promoting review and refinement of skills as students develop their final pieces
- building on recent improvements in provision by:
 - developing the roles and responsibilities of staff in relation to the vision expressed by senior staff and the subject leader
 - enriching the curriculum in Years 7 to 9 with direct experience of the work of artists, craftworkers and designers
 - ensuring that sketchbooks are used consistently and continuously, including for experimentation and drawing.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop art, craft and design education at 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

Ian Middleton
Her Majesty's Inspector