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Mrs N Arnull
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Dear Mrs Arnull

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 16 and 17 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 satisfactory.

Achievement in history

Achievement in history is satisfactory.

- Last year, achievement for Year 11 students by the end of their GCSE course was inadequate. While the proportion of students attaining grades A* to C was broadly in line with the national average, this was too low, given students' above average starting points. The proportion of students attaining grades A* to A was significantly lower than average.
- However, students currently in Key Stage 4 are making satisfactory progress with increasing numbers of Year 10 students making good progress. As a result, attainment is rising to be more closely matched to students' potential. Current projections, based on modular tests and data from controlled assessments, indicate clear improvements in attainment for students currently in Year 11.

- Achievement in history for sixth-form students dipped and was satisfactory in 2010 having previously been good. Rates of progress are now improving but remain satisfactory overall.
- Students make satisfactory progress during Key Stage 3. They develop good historical knowledge of studies in depth and their understanding of change and continuity over time. Students' understanding of the full range of historical concepts and processes is not fully developed.
- History makes a good contribution to students' personal development. Students enjoy history and almost always behave well. Occasionally, a very small minority of students lose focus and slow the pace of learning for the rest of the group.

Quality of teaching in history

The quality of teaching in history is satisfactory.

- Teaching in the department is good but this is not yet sufficiently consistent to secure good progress for all groups of students.
- Lessons benefit from teachers' good organisation and the time they invest in producing very high-quality resources. Teachers plan well to remove barriers to learning, particularly for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities. On occasions, the support provided militates against developing students' independence.
- Teachers are imaginative in devising activities which secure good levels of enjoyment and engagement. Students respond well to carefully conceived, challenging and well-paced collaborative work. Some students reported that such opportunities are not provided consistently across the department.
- While learning objectives and success criteria are routinely shared with students, they are not always sufficiently challenging. Opportunities are sometimes missed to structure learning around high-quality evaluative questions which challenge students to think hard about complex historical issues. Similarly, in some lessons, teachers do not provide sufficient opportunities for students to consider how the lesson fits into their overarching historical enquiry. This results in missed opportunities for students to deepen their historical understanding.
- While end-of-unit assessments are marked thoroughly, day-to-day marking is not sufficiently effective in helping students to improve their attainment in history. In lessons, assessment methods are not always effective enough in gauging students' understanding, with an over-reliance on useful but limited assessment strategies.

Quality of the curriculum in history

The quality of the curriculum in history is satisfactory.

- History is a popular subject at GCSE and A level and higher proportions of students opt to pursue the subject beyond Year 9 than is average.

- The curriculum is enhanced by good provision for enrichment, including a biannual sixth form visit to Berlin and trips for younger students to sites of historical interest, such as the Tower of London and the battlefields of the First World War.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum has been suitably adapted to reflect the revised National Curriculum, although opportunities to study local history are limited.
- Good opportunities for students to study topics in depth are complemented by well-conceived thematic studies which build students' understanding of change and continuity over time. A good example of this is the Year 8 unit, 'who are the British?', which builds students' understanding of migration to, from and within the British Isles from pre-Roman Britain to the present day.
- The curriculum does not yet provide sufficient opportunities to develop students' skills in evaluative thinking and writing. Too many of the written tasks and assessments articulated in curriculum plans demand descriptive rather than analytical writing. Hence, opportunities to deepen students' historical understanding and to develop their intellectual confidence are missed. In some areas, curriculum plans lack clarity and coherence about precisely which skills are being developed.
- At Key Stages 4 and 5, the curriculum is improving to more closely reflect the demands of the course as teachers grow increasingly familiar with revised specifications. Older students reported that they would prefer more curriculum time to be devoted to examination technique to improve their understanding of how to secure their individual target grades.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in history

The effectiveness of leadership and management in history is satisfactory.

- Strategies to improve monitoring and evaluation across the school, together with strengthened leadership and management arrangements in history, are making a significant contribution to raising achievement in history.
- The subject leader is increasingly effective in driving improvement as a result of highly effective self-evaluation and a good training programme. Intervention strategies to address underachievement are more timely, comprehensive and effective than before with the result that attainment is rising in Key Stage 4.
- Leaders and managers know that day-to-day monitoring of teaching, marking and the use of assessment is not yet sufficiently rigorous or robust to secure good progress for all groups of students in all classes.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- securing good achievement for all groups of students in lessons and over time, by:

- providing regular opportunities for students to practise examination questions against clear criteria so that they understand, precisely, what they need to do to achieve their target grade
- ensuring that teaching and the curriculum consistently provide high levels of challenge through increased opportunities for students to apply their developing historical knowledge to answer challenging historical questions
- ensuring that assessment at Key Stage 3 is fully integrated into day-to-day learning activities so that students gain more practice in improving their subject-specific skills and that marking has more impact in raising achievement
- strengthening monitoring and evaluation procedures so that good practice in teaching, marking and the use of assessment is seen consistently.

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