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Ms J Miles
Principal
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Dear Ms Miles

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: music

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

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, a vocal lesson and the singing club.

The overall effectiveness of music is inadequate. There are significant weaknesses in the quality of teaching, the curriculum and in the leadership of music which adversely affects the progress made by students. However, the openness and professional discussions held during the inspection indicated that senior leaders have the determination and understanding to work with the department to develop provision and effect improvements in students' achievement.

Achievement in music

Achievement in music is inadequate.

- Standards in Key Stage 3 are low in all aspects of music learning. Generally, students are adept at using information and communication technology (ICT) to manipulate pre-recorded sounds. However, their singing skills are underdeveloped and they lack the musical knowledge needed to improve their work and produce coherent and structured

pieces. Students' prior musical abilities and experiences are mixed and overall they make unsatisfactory progress.

- In Key Stage 4, students follow the BTEC First Certificate in Music course and/or the GCSE Expressive Arts course. In both, results have been low and the work of current students, observed during the inspection, indicates that their standards are similarly low. Students' work lacks flair, imagination and understanding of musical conventions and different styles. Applying previous musical knowledge is a challenge for many students; consequently, progress is unsatisfactory.
- A reasonable number of students benefit from additional instrumental lessons. Although performing is a challenge for some students, opportunities within the Academy and the city are provided and these are welcomed by those who take part. Currently, the singing group is the only music ensemble that meets out of lesson time and this consists mainly of girls.

Quality of teaching in music

The quality of teaching in music is inadequate.

- Lack of student engagement in music-making and providing work that both meets individual needs and abilities and ensures their progression, are significant weaknesses in lessons. Expectations are often low and although video and audio recordings are made, these are not sufficiently well used to help students take responsibility for their own learning and to make the musical decisions needed so that they can learn how to improve.
- Considerable effort is made to provide eye-catching graphics and helpful resources to help and remind students about links between previous learning and the current tasks. Despite this, the variable quality of teachers' subject knowledge means that their ability to impart information, develop and extend students' answers is inconsistent.
- In the better lessons, teachers model musical characteristics either through instrumental or vocal demonstrations. Students' first attempts are not automatically accepted and, consequently, the musical quality of learning improves because they can appreciate and understand the changes to their work.
- In instrumental and vocal lessons, together with ensembles, some attention is paid to improving students' posture and performance skills. However, a lack of 'warm-up' work and attention to musical detail restricts students' progress and does not ensure improvements to their intonation and vocal quality.

Quality of the curriculum in music

The quality of the curriculum in music is inadequate.

- The study schedules for Key Stage 3 provide a brief, superficial description of the units to be taught but give no indication as to how students' musical skills, particularly singing, are to be developed. This information also gives

insufficient regard to the expected progress students will make in lessons during Years 7 and 8.

- Similarly, the study schedules in Key Stage 4 only describe the course requirements and are not adapted to meet the specific needs of the students in each group.
- Teachers and students are fortunate to have impressive accommodation and resources in the department, which enable them to use a wide variety of electronic and acoustic instruments.
- Presently the only extra-curricular music ensemble is the singing group. However, some students are invited to attend workshops and concerts from professional musicians; these are well-received and enjoyed. There are also some opportunities for students studying examination courses to work with members of the instrumental staff. However, the work of the instrumental teachers, who are employed directly by the Academy, is not quality-assured to ensure its positive impact on students' attainment.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in music

The effectiveness of leadership and management in music is inadequate.

- Music is part of the performing arts faculty and regular meetings are held where mainly administrative issues are discussed. Music adheres well to the sponsor's expectations regarding, for example, gathering regular assessment data and the development of the core subjects in lessons, but too often this is at the expense of students' musical development. Students in Year 8 are following the Arts Award Bronze course; however, leaders and external evaluations recognise that there are weaknesses in its delivery which impact negatively on the attainment of the students involved.
- The monitoring of provision, especially class teaching and that of the instrumental staff, is underdeveloped, with the systems and processes to do so only recently introduced. Consequently, although the Academy's leadership offers subsidies for instrumental and vocal lessons as well as providing free workshops and concerts, the lack of rigour in evaluating all these events and other music provision does not ensure value for money.
- Links with partner schools are underdeveloped. There is insufficient awareness of current music initiatives in Key Stage 2, and leaders recognise this work must be given urgent attention.
- Consideration of examination results and the tracking of students' progress have not been sufficiently thorough in order to identify the causes of, or the potential for, underachievement. Consequently, although the department runs smoothly from day-to-day, there is no well informed strategy for improvement.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving students' achievement and raising standards in music by:

- ensuring that students are shown how to improve their work and that they are able, and expected, to contribute musical ideas in lessons
 - raising expectations of students' capabilities and ensuring that their initial ideas and suggestions are considered and developed
 - using video and audio recordings regularly so that students can understand how to improve musically
 - adapting the current study schedules to ensure that there is clear indication of how students' musical skills are to be developed and progression assured
 - including singing regularly in lessons
 - implementing additional ensembles out of lesson time and monitoring students' participation
- making sure that leaders encourage music teachers to teach musically and ensure that they are not constrained by external expectations and influences which might impact adversely on students' progress.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop music in the school.

As 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.

Yours sincerely

Marianne Young
Her Majesty's Inspector