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Mr C Turner
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Dear Mr Turner

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 28 and 29 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: discussions with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of five lessons, two of which were jointly observed with you, the rehearsal for the orchestra and the Young Voices singing group.

The overall effectiveness of music is inadequate. There are significant weaknesses in all areas of music provision. Specifically, curriculum planning and teaching do not promote the development of students' musical skills and as a result, students' progress is unsatisfactory.

Achievement in music

Achievement in music is inadequate.

- Standards reached by students at the end of Year 9 are low. Occasionally singing features in lessons for students in Years 7 and 8, but developing their vocal work is not a common feature. Insufficient development of students' creative and composing skills is also evident. Given students' broadly average prior attainment when they join in Year 7, progress in Key Stage 3 is inadequate.

- During the past three years, an above-average number of students have taken GCSE music. However, standards have been low and the work seen by current students in Year 11 is also of a low standard.
- A new music technology course, which has attracted two students, began in September 2011. Early indications are that students are enjoying the course; however, although students understand the technical aspect of the course, the depth of their musical discussions is limited.
- A very small number of students receive instrumental lessons and similarly, a small number are involved in extra-curricular activities. The Young Voices choir is popular with those who attend (predominantly girls in Years 7 and 8), and provides them with the opportunity to perform with other students at national venues.

Quality of teaching in music

The quality of teaching in music is inadequate.

- Teachers do not pay sufficient regard to students' prior musical experiences when planning lessons. Consequently, challenge and expectations are too low resulting in unsatisfactory progress. Too often students are given information without the opportunity, through questioning and musical demonstrations, to show that they understand what they have been told.
- There is an over-reliance on worksheets and traditional stave notation which limits students' individuality and creativity. Learning objectives are indicated at the start of lessons, but too often they tell students what they are to do and not what they are to learn. Commendably, students do work well together and when given the chance, as was evident in a lesson for Year 10 students, engage in musical discussion and decisions. However, even here, progress was limited due to their lack of prior musical awareness and understanding.
- Students are set targets at the start of the year; however, these are insufficiently detailed to help them understand how to improve their work. Challenge in lessons is restricted to increasing the technical difficulty of an activity. For example, in a Year 7 lesson, students were expected to play the tune 'Ode to Joy' with one hand, then with two. To improve further, students were told simply 'to play faster'. Insufficient attention was given to students playing with awareness of the melodic line and to ensure that the rhythm was accurate throughout the piece.
- Particularly in Years 10 and 11, the component parts of the music examination are taught in isolation which makes it difficult for students to make musical connections. This lack of structure means that students struggle to produce coherent and imaginative pieces when composing.

Quality of the curriculum in music

The quality of the curriculum in music is inadequate.

- The scheme of work for Key Stage 3 lacks breadth and depth and does not demonstrate how students' musical skills are to be developed. It does not meet statutory requirements because students are unable to use information and communication technology (ICT) in their lessons. Singing is not a regular part of music lessons in all years. Consequently, there are significant omissions in the development of students' musical skills as they move through Years 7 to 9.
- The Key Stage 4 scheme of work has not been customised to meet the students' individual needs and to ensure that the component parts of the examination are linked together to ensure progression.
- The music facilities and resources for students in the sixth form are impressive; however, those for other students do not match this standard. The lack of computer programs severely restricts GCSE students' ability to organise, manipulate and notate music in a range of formats and thus suit individuals' preferences.
- Apart from the Young Voices singing group, no other music ensembles meet regularly. Students are able to use the music facilities out of lesson time and this is popular with a few.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in music

The effectiveness of leadership and management in music is inadequate.

- Analysis of previous examination results and students' progress has not been undertaken rigorously to identify the root causes of underperformance. Consequently, leaders have allowed this situation to continue. The most recent self-evaluation provides an overgenerous view of provision with limited evidence provided to support the judgements. The subject leaders' view of provision was not supported during the inspection.
- Students at the start of Year 7 complete a sheet which allows them to indicate what music they like and if they would like to play an instrument. It does not question their involvement in national music initiatives while in primary school, such as Wider Opportunities and Sing Up. Links with the feeder primary schools are insufficient, and when music lessons are planned very little regard is paid to students' prior experiences and interests.
- Management of music has been insufficiently proactive in putting measures into place to secure improvements. Senior leaders recognise that insufficient support and guidance have been given and that, therefore, there is currently a lack of vision and direction.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the effectiveness of teaching in music by:
 - ensuring that lesson planning takes full account of students' particular musical skills and abilities, including those gained from instrumental lessons, external music activities, and their prior learning in primary schools

- removing the didactic approach to delivering lessons which currently stifles students' creativity and independence
 - making certain that students' progress is measured accurately and that they know what they need to do to improve.
- reviewing curriculum planning for all year groups by December 2011 to ensure that:
- the schemes of work for both Key Stages 3 and 4 are customised for all classes and all statutory aspects are covered appropriately
 - more, regular music ensembles and opportunities for students to perform frequently are offered
- ensuring that senior leaders support the music department by understanding the causes of previous underperformance and identifying key priorities for improvement, leading to an action plan that is measurable and informative.

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. A copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Marianne Young
Her Majesty's Inspector