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Mr T Cahill
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Cahill

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 11 and 12 October 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 six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history is good.

Achievement in history

Achievement in history is outstanding.

- Students' attainment has been consistently high in GCSE examinations in the last few years. All groups make good progress in Key Stages 3 and 4. Progress in the sixth form has improved strongly and is now good, as a result of the careful monitoring of students' work.
- Students have a very good grasp of the importance of studying history. Year 11 identified the importance of trying to avoid mistakes made in the past and one student noted that the contemporary world sometimes seem to show 'how we haven't learnt from history'. Year 13 students stressed how the roots of recent events often lie in the more distant past while one emphasised the subject's role in 'finding out why things are the way they are'.

- Students have a very good understanding of the importance of evaluating historical sources carefully and exploring their provenance. They grasp the complexity of constructing accounts of the past well, for example the consequences of the Cuban Missile Crisis and how these can be investigated over both longer and shorter periods of time. Students have a mature grasp of how the differing backgrounds of historians can contribute to shaping their interpretations of events and developments in the past.
- History makes a strong contribution to students' personal development. They enjoy the subject and value the opportunities provided for them to develop their own ideas, with a partner or in a small group, and then to share these with the class.

Quality of teaching in history

The quality of teaching in history is good.

- Lessons are well planned and teachers share a firm commitment to enabling students to achieve as well as they can, setting high expectations to which the students' respond impressively.
- In lessons observed, these high expectations were evident and well supported by teachers' good subject knowledge. A brisk pace in learning was maintained and challenging sources were often used that required students to show good skills of inference. Sequences of activities were constructed well to build understanding and equip students to write their own accounts. Teachers explored the features of a good piece of work thoroughly with classes to help students do as well as possible. Students' behaviour observed was outstanding.
- Students value teachers' marking and the clarity of the individual guidance offered on how to do better. They greatly appreciate the trouble teachers take to go over work undertaken with the class, identifying common strengths and areas for improvement.

Quality of the curriculum in history

The quality of the curriculum in history is good.

- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is well organised into a suitable range of units. Links with other studies are identified in particular units. However, currently the overarching themes are not set out clearly enough across Years 7 to 9 for the benefit of students in helping them to connect learning with previous or subsequent work.
- The curricula for Key Stage 4 and the sixth form are designed to meet the requirements of the examination boards appropriately. Planning and lessons observed indicate a continuing commitment to activities that help students to develop and share their ideas.
- Students benefit from a good range of visits and visitors that enhances the curriculum. The opportunity to tour some of the First World War

battlefields of the Western Front is particularly appreciated and has resulted in some most impressive subsequent work.

- The department is currently reviewing its approaches to teacher assessment in Key Stage 3 and rightly seeking to improve arrangements to ensure that samples of students' work are carefully compared and considered to help staff to make accurate assessments. Current approaches involve teachers in much detailed marking of considerable sequences of work where it is difficult to share the marking scheme with students and also to identify examples of work of different standards.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in history

The effectiveness of leadership and management in history is good.

- The subject leader is deeply committed to history and its role in developing students' understanding of the world around them. He works closely with his colleagues to ensure the continuing development of the subject.
- Self-evaluation is accurate and there are clear and appropriate priorities for further improvement. History benefits from the school's departmental review arrangements and is one of the first subject areas to be involved in the revised procedures this year.
- The progress of individual students is closely monitored. The department is rightly aware that it needs to identify students at risk of underachievement at an earlier stage, particularly in the GCSE course, so that more effective action can be taken. The department does not currently have data readily to hand on the progress of particular groups of students, for example those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The benefits of the new school system need to be fully exploited to address this.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving arrangements for teacher assessment in Key Stage 3 to assure the consistency of assessments more effectively and to make procedures more manageable for staff and more accessible for students
- using data more effectively to identify, and act upon, possible underachievement at an early stage and to analyse the progress of particular groups of students routinely.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop history 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

Grahame Sherfield
Her Majesty's Inspector