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Mr R Davis
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Dear Mr Davis

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: modern languages (ML)

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 18 and 19 October 2011 to look at work in ML.

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 ML is satisfactory.

Achievement in ML

Achievement in ML is satisfactory.

- In Key Stage 3, students make good progress and the majority meet or exceed their targets. Attainment in Key Stage 4 has been low but is improving because the school has introduced a range of qualifications that better meets the needs and abilities of all students. Turbulence in staffing in the past has had a negative impact on performance, but these issues have now been addressed. Students in Key Stage 5 make satisfactory progress given their starting points.
- Students show considerable enthusiasm for and commitment to their study of languages. They speak proudly of the school's specialist status. Students can give many reasons why it is useful to learn a language and take-up has improved year on year.

- Students speak confidently, particularly when given the opportunity to do so in a real and relevant context. For example, in a Year 7 Spanish lesson, students clearly enjoyed interviewing other members of the class to find out information for a survey on birthdays. The teacher skilfully harnessed the students' natural curiosity which engaged them and provided a clear purpose for the activity. Students listen well and can borrow books and magazines from school to improve their reading skills. Writing skills are underdeveloped and students have insufficient opportunities to write creatively and at length without support.

Quality of teaching in ML

The quality of teaching in ML is good.

- Teachers communicate high expectations, passion and enthusiasm for learning languages to their students. All teachers have excellent subject knowledge and their skilful use of the target language provides a very good model of pronunciation to students.
- Teachers plan a range of varied and imaginative activities that engages learners and students say that 'learning languages is fun!' Students particularly enjoy games, quizzes and songs and they speak enthusiastically about the excellent use that teachers make of information and communication technology. For example, students appreciate the range of materials to support their language learning available through the school's virtual learning environment.
- The use of assessment to support learning is underdeveloped but improving. Teachers do not always use the wealth of information available from examination boards to plan lessons that are sufficiently challenging. In addition, opportunities are missed to provide precise information to students on how to improve their work in specific skills.

Quality of the curriculum in ML

The quality of the curriculum in ML is good.

- The curriculum is broad and balanced. Students can learn two, and, in some instances, three languages throughout the school. Ample time is allocated to languages on the timetable.
- The scheme of work is imaginative and the learning environment is excellent. Displays are of a high quality, celebrating achievement and supporting language acquisition. There are many opportunities to work with other departments. For example, students prepare French food and, in one Year 7 class, students were learning how to use adjectives to describe a puppet they were going to make.
- The department has worked highly effectively with primary schools in creating a common scheme of work. As a result, the school builds well on the knowledge and skills that students have previously acquired.

- The school runs a wide range of trips and visits. Students speak enthusiastically of these opportunities and participation rates are high. Students' intercultural understanding is well-developed.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in ML

The effectiveness of leadership and management in ML is satisfactory.

- The languages department has benefited from your astute leadership and clear focus on improving outcomes for students. Subject leadership is satisfactory but improving strongly, because of the support and challenge provided by senior leaders.
- Monitoring and evaluation of provision by senior leaders are increasingly rigorous, but less so at middle leadership level. Self-evaluation has lacked sharpness and therefore planning for improvement is not sufficiently focused. Underperformance has not been tackled robustly enough in the past to secure improved outcomes for students, but procedures are now in place to do so.
- Subject leadership inspires confidence from students and teachers. There is a shared sense of purpose in the department and a discernible ambition to drive improvement.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising attainment in languages by:
 - ensuring that all lessons are sufficiently challenging to accelerate students' progress
 - using assessment criteria available to ensure that students receive precise information on how to improve their work
 - providing more opportunities for students to write at length creatively and independently
 - tackling underperformance swiftly to secure improved outcomes for students.

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

Joan Davis
Her Majesty's Inspector