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Mr P Butterworth
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Dear Mr Butterworth

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 2 and 3 November 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, including recordings of recent GCSE compositions; a meeting with the head of the Sutton Music Service; short observations of individual and group instrumental or vocal lessons, and rock band practices; and observations of five class lessons including a joint observation with a senior school leader.

The overall effectiveness of music is inadequate.

Achievement in music

Achievement in music is inadequate.

- Standards in Key Stage 3 are below average, representing inadequate progress given students' capabilities. Purposeful composition work, singing, performance and playing of acoustic instruments are underdeveloped. Despite their low achievement, students enjoy class lessons.
- A consistently higher proportion of students than the national average take music at GCSE. Many study instruments outside the school, privately or through the Sutton Music Service. An above average proportion gain A* to C grades, though this proportion is below average at A* and A grades.

Given their starting points, GCSE students achieve well. They learn assuredly, showing good knowledge of different musical styles and how they link with each other. Achievement at GCSE is the school's key musical strength. Despite the positive GCSE outcomes, the school does not offer any level 3 (A level) courses in music, though these courses are available in nearby schools.

- The proportion of students taking part in musical extra-curricular activities or instrumental lessons is extremely low, particularly in older year groups. There is no teaching of orchestral instruments and there are no visiting teachers although members of staff provide some individual and group lessons free of charge. There is no school orchestra, or similar, and few opportunities for choral or group singing beyond a Year 7 choir and recently formed 'glee club'.
- Music has a low profile in the school; occasional productions involve music but it does not routinely contribute to day-to-day communal events such as assemblies.

Quality of teaching in music

The quality of teaching in music is satisfactory.

- Teachers manage and pace lessons appropriately. Teachers and the music technician have strong musical knowledge. They are enthusiastic and encouraging of the students and ensure that students understand what they are expected to do in each lesson. In some Key Stage 3 lessons, however, teachers' explanations take too long with the result that opportunities for students to be engaged, actively, in their learning are limited.
- The assessment of students' attainment at Key Stage 3 is often inaccurate and inflated because assessment activities focus on small-scale tasks, rather than on sufficiently wide-ranging musical activity. In addition, too little account is taken of students' prior learning, or learning outside of school, with tasks not adapted to provide for their capabilities.
- In contrast, teaching at GCSE is consistently good and is the key reason why students progress well. Staff provide clear explanations and musical modelling, engaging constructively with students' own ideas and preferences. This gives students confidence and clarity about how they can succeed. Assessments are accurate and students know how to improve their work.

Quality of the curriculum in music

The quality of the curriculum in music is inadequate.

- The time given to music lessons in Key Stage 3 is insufficient for an adequately broad range of musical activity. Recognising this, you have introduced additional lesson time for all Year 7 classes this year but have not yet done so for Years 8 and 9.

- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is poorly constructed. It is based on a published scheme and insufficiently adapted for the school's needs. Musical concepts are not developed in a coherent or progressive way. Too many activities have insufficient content and are poorly linked to previous and future learning. For example, in Year 7, students write song tunes. The scheme of work, however, does not identify what key musical elements should be involved, such as tonality or tempo. Consequently, students instead spend much valuable time writing lyrics, without any serious consideration of any musical purposes; their work is shallow and they cannot evaluate it effectively against musical criteria. In Year 9, students can now opt for an additional music lesson each fortnight but a curriculum is not yet designed for them.
- The scheme of work at GCSE is well organised, providing a sound basis for the good teaching and progress. Students' activities are suitably constructed and linked together to provide a coherent and challenging experience, with clear and specific objectives at each stage.
- The school has no significant partnerships with other schools, including feeder primary schools, or the Sutton music service, for example, to bring curriculum improvements or develop the weak extra-curricular provision.
- Accommodation is generally suitable for class and large group activities. However, there are few practice rooms which restricts some activities. Too few resources are available in some key areas. There are no working tuned percussion instruments and few untuned instruments. This is a severe constraint and leads to the default overuse of electronic keyboards. The small number of computers available in music are used well in GCSE lessons but underused in Key Stage 3.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in music

The effectiveness of leadership and management in music is inadequate.

- You directly line manage the music department because you correctly recognise its need for support. Music has not yet been involved in the programme of departmental reviews. Senior staff do not have the subject expertise to be clear about all the department's weaknesses.
- Few external partnerships involve music. Staff have not undertaken sufficient recent training, or looked at practice elsewhere, to benchmark their work against others.
- The departmental self-evaluation correctly highlights some of the inadequacies and barriers to success, such as the limited time given to the subject in Key Stage 3. However, self-evaluation does not adequately identify the significant improvements the department itself needs to make to secure improvement. For example, no analysis is undertaken to examine if the best use is made of the staff time given to small group and individual tuition. These points are thus not being adequately addressed.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving considerably the curriculum at Key Stage 3, so that students' attainment reaches national expectations by summer 2013, by:
 - ensuring that musical skills are identified precisely and developed progressively and at a challenging level throughout the key stage
 - considering the greater use and exploration by students of acoustic instruments, including tuned and untuned percussion
 - improving the purposeful use of singing throughout the key stage
 - improving the accuracy of assessment
 - ensuring that sufficient lesson time is available to cover an appropriate breadth and depth of musical experience
- developing and broadening the musical understanding and experience of departmental and senior staff, so that they can evaluate more accurately the impact of provision and how to promote improvement, by:
 - working more closely with other schools
 - undertaking further training and professional development
 - working with the Sutton music service or any other sources of expertise
- increasing the range of musical opportunities for students throughout the school, by:
 - providing individual and group lessons in a wider range of instruments, and evaluating the outcomes of all such work
 - establishing a better range of school instrumental ensembles and choral groups, including for older students
 - improving the accommodation so that it is suitable for a wider range of activity
 - considering providing Level 3 courses in music to build on students' achievements at GCSE.

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

Robin Hammerton
Her Majesty's Inspector