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7 March 2012

Mrs K Frederick
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Frederick

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: history

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 28 and 29 February 2012 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 11 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history is satisfactory.

Achievement in history

Achievement in history is satisfactory.

- Achievement is satisfactory because the quality of learning and progress has been satisfactory over time. However, differences remain between the key stages.
- At Key Stage 3, many students make good progress in developing their historical knowledge and understanding. However, opportunities are missed for all students to develop and refine their analytical and discursive writing skills. As a result, they are not consistently challenged and supported to reach the highest levels.
- For the last three years, results at GCSE have improved but they remain well below national average and achievement has been inadequate. The department has put in place a series of actions to raise attainment for all

groups of students. Current estimates of performance indicate that attainment is expected to rise and that more students are on track to achieve their targets.

- In the sixth form, students enjoy the International Baccalaureate (IB) course, are challenged in their studies, and make at least satisfactory progress in their learning. Some students make good progress.
- History makes a good contribution to students' personal development. Students have positive attitudes to learning, behave well in lessons and work well together and on their own. Students recognise the value of studying the subject. In the words of one older student, 'in history you have to make your own judgements and this ensures that you have an open mind'.

Quality of teaching in history

The quality of teaching in history is satisfactory.

- While teaching and the use of assessment to support learning are satisfactory, overall teaching observed was good. However, it has not been sufficiently consistent over time to secure good progress for all students.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge and lessons are well organised. In the best lessons, students actively investigate issues and teachers use a variety of tasks and activities to maintain students' interest and engagement. However, the practice of students copying down key questions for learning at the start of every lesson removes an opportunity for immediate engagement.
- Although learning objectives and success criteria are shared with students, they are not always sufficiently challenging. Opportunities are sometimes missed to structure learning around high-quality evaluative questions which challenge students to think about complex historical issues. Similarly, teachers do not always provide sufficient opportunities for students to consider how the lesson fits into their overarching historical enquiry. This results in missed opportunities for students to deepen their historical understanding.
- Students are developing effective enquiry skills. However, sometimes too much guidance is given by teachers and opportunities for students to take the initiative and develop their own questions and lines of enquiry are missed.
- Although lessons are usually well paced, teachers sometimes plan in too great a detail and try to cover too much. As a result, insufficient opportunities are provided for students to discuss and debate what they are learning.
- Students' thinking is stimulated by good questioning. However, they are not always required to turn short oral answers into full sentences which would assist them when they move on to write their ideas. As a result, opportunities for students to develop formal rather than informal explanations are not always taken.

- Marking and written feedback are good. Students in all key stages receive increasingly helpful subject-specific advice which clearly shows them how to improve.
- In some lessons, teachers use ongoing assessment skilfully to ensure that students made at least good progress. However, such effective practice is not yet embedded across the department and teachers' expectations and the level of challenge provided are not always aligned closely enough to students' needs.

Quality of the curriculum in history

The quality of the curriculum in history is satisfactory.

- The curriculum at Key Stage 3 covers a range of appropriate topics. It is in the process of transition. The department is aware of the importance of ensuring that enough attention is given to answering key historical questions through enquiries, which combine depth, overview and thematic studies, and that teachers have a clear understanding of how they can develop the full range of key historical concepts and processes as students move through the school.
- At Key Stage 4, and in the sixth form, students enjoy the exam specifications. On the IB course, for example, they particularly like the variety of topics they study and the opportunity to undertake an independent enquiry of their own choice.
- A number of cross-curricular projects and visits to museums and places of historic interest help to enrich students' learning in history and contribute effectively to their social, moral, spiritual and cultural development. However, opportunities to develop students' oral and written literacy in history are missed and enrichment opportunities are not fully exploited.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in history

The effectiveness of leadership and management in history is satisfactory.

- The head of history, who is also head of humanities and an Advanced Skills teacher, leads a department which is improving provision in history across the school and is keen to increase the numbers of students who choose to take the subject at GCSE.
- Teachers are passionate about the subject and are keen to impart their enthusiasm to the students who appreciate their knowledge and hard work. As one younger student pointed out, 'they're always buzzing'. A strong team spirit exists within the department, with a tangible drive to improve outcomes for students.
- Self-evaluation is accurate and the department has identified strengths and appropriate priorities for further improvement.
- The department runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis. Teachers benefit from teaching in adjoining rooms, cooperate well and readily share good practice.

- Curriculum and assessment links with neighbouring primary schools, to ensure that from the start of Year 7 students can make swift progress in their history lessons, are underdeveloped.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- Securing good achievement for all groups of students in lessons and over time, by:
 - ensuring that teaching and the curriculum consistently provide high levels of expectation through increased opportunities for all students to apply their developing historical knowledge to answering challenging historical questions and thereby strengthen their analytical and discursive writing skills
 - developing teaching strategies to ensure that in lessons, expectation and challenge are more closely aligned to students' needs and students are provided with regular opportunities to explain their ideas formally, when discussing and debating what they are learning, and to take the initiative and determine their own questions and lines of enquiry
 - ensuring that the curriculum at Key Stage 3 covers an appropriate range of topics through a combination of depth, overview and thematic studies
 - ensuring that, as students move through Key Stage 3, teachers have a clear understanding of how they can develop the full range of key historical concepts and processes
 - establishing closer curriculum and assessment links with neighbouring primary schools to ensure that from the start of Year 7 students can make swift progress in developing their historical knowledge, thinking and understanding.

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

Yours sincerely

Michael Maddison
Her Majesty's Inspector