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Mrs C Jackman
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Dear Mrs Jackman

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

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 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 12 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML is satisfactory.

Achievement in ML

Achievement in ML is satisfactory.

- In 2011, students achieved results in GCSE examinations that were below the national average for French and Spanish and slightly below in German, although large numbers of students were entered. All of these subjects have been affected by long-term staff absences, but especially Spanish.
- The progress of students currently in school is improving now that staffing has stabilised, especially at Key Stage 3. Students in all years are committed to learning a language and know why it is important, as they have good opportunities to see how languages are used in business and in further education.
- Students listen carefully in class. They read basic texts well, but their understanding of a wider range of authentic materials is less well

developed. They use information and communication technology well, including video conferencing, to learn about schools in other countries. Speaking and writing are less evenly developed. In some Year 7 classes, students were able to produce a radio advert for their town, giving reasons why it was worth visiting. In some Year 11 lessons, students gave very short answers with poor pronunciation about what they do with their free time. Higher-attaining students apply the grammar they have learnt accurately and produce satisfactory writing, but middle-ability students often make basic mistakes of agreement and word order. Less able students are often hindered by weak literacy skills which slow down their completion of tasks, making it difficult for them to revise from their notes.

Quality of teaching in ML

The quality of teaching in ML is satisfactory.

- Teaching in Key Stage 4 has focused on reading and listening at the expense of tasks which allow students to speak and write. Much work in Year 11 has not been marked for long periods of time due to the staffing issues.
- In Years 7 and 8 teaching is much better, students receive good feedback about what they need to do to improve and much more attention is paid to developing speaking skills and giving students the chance to say what they want to say. Nevertheless, in a few lessons, teachers did not correct pronunciation well, too often giving praise for participation rather than accuracy.
- Teaching assistants and foreign language assistants play an important role in helping students to improve their work, as both are well trained and experienced in the requirements of the examinations.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge and use the language well in lower years to explain tasks and encourage students to use the language for real requests. Pace is generally good; teachers use a range of techniques to ensure that students complete the work quickly, including setting time limits and having musical countdowns.
- Relationships are generally satisfactory, but in some lessons, where tasks are not engaging, students do not behave as well. Work is not always well matched to the needs and interests of students with little use of authentic materials, especially in Year 11, which means that sometimes students lack motivation.

Quality of the curriculum in ML

The quality of the curriculum in ML is satisfactory.

- The school is an International School, having been a language college, and has retained some excellent aspects of its curriculum. For example, all students in Year 10 take part in a day when they simulate being at an airport and have to check in, pass through security and board an imaginary plane, where only the foreign language is used.

- They have regular opportunities to travel abroad and to meet people from other countries and have a good understanding of cultural similarities and differences.
- The school continues to employ a teacher who teaches French in the local primary schools. This ensures the curriculum in Year 7 builds on what students have learnt and includes a trip to France. With the exception of special events, the schemes of work at Key Stage 4 are almost exclusively based on text books and preparation for examinations and fail to motivate students sufficiently to ensure they make good progress.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in ML

The effectiveness of leadership and management in ML is satisfactory.

- The school is well aware of the problems that have been caused by staff absences. It has worked hard to address these problems by, for example, reducing the number of languages taught and allowing a small group of students not to continue with a language at Key Stage 4. Teaching at Key Stage 3 has improved, but the variability in the quality has had a negative impact on students' attitudes in Key Stage 4 and middle managers have not yet been able to improve this area sufficiently to raise standards in examinations. The current plans include the need to improve students' spoken skills and this has been successful in Years 7 and 8. Policies on areas such as marking are under development and practice is now more consistent.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the quality of planning and teaching at Key Stage 4 so that work meets the needs and interests of all students while ensuring that assessment is accurate
- ensuring that all students develop the ability to speak at length and with good pronunciation.

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

Joanna Peach
Additional Inspector