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Mr D Alexander
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Alexander

Ofsted 2012–13 subject survey inspection programme: history

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 9 to 10 May 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 seven lessons. All of the lessons were jointly observed with a representative of the school's leadership team.

The overall effectiveness of history is satisfactory.

Achievement in history

Achievement in history is satisfactory.

- While satisfactory overall, achievement is improving rapidly and securely across all key stages thanks to good leadership and management. Results in national tests are usually broadly in line with that found nationally, although GCSE results dipped in 2011, especially at the highest grades. Success rates in the sixth form are satisfactory but rates of progress are accelerating. As a result, by the end of Years 12 and 13 attainment is now broadly average and rising quickly.
- Targeted professional development focusing on high-quality teaching and a more rigorous programme of monitoring and evaluation is successfully reducing the variation in achievement that remains.

- Analysis of the work of students, their performance in lessons and current assessment information shows marked improvements in students' achievement. However, it is too early for the impact of these improvements to be seen fully in examination results.
- Inspection evidence shows that students make good gains in developing their knowledge and understanding. However, too few opportunities exist to engage students in refining and developing their analytical and discursive writing skills so that they are consistently challenged and supported to reach the highest levels.
- 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 and older students articulate confidently how their studies help to build their understanding of contemporary society.

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.
- 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 fully discuss and consolidate what they are learning.
- Students have positive attitudes to learning and, when given the opportunity, delight in shaping lines of enquiry in lessons to drive learning forward. Learning and progress is palpable when students are encouraged to take more responsibility for their learning by developing ideas of their own and extending their historical skills.
- Learning objectives and success criteria are routinely shared with students but they are not always sufficiently challenging. Consequently, opportunities are sometimes missed to structure learning around high-quality and evaluative questions which challenge all students to carefully consider complex historical issues. This results in missed opportunities for students to deepen and extend their historical thinking and understanding.
- Marking and assessment are good though some variability exists. At Key Stage 4, and in the sixth form, marking consistently ensures that students are clear about the next steps in their learning. However, across all key stages, opportunities are missed to capitalise on the significant potential of students to develop their own learning through the use of teachers' comments to reshape and/or refine historical skills.

Quality of the curriculum in history

The quality of the curriculum in history is satisfactory.

- History is a popular subject at GCSE and A level and higher proportions of students opt to pursue the subject beyond Year 9 than seen in other schools nationally. The curriculum at Key Stage 3 covers a range of appropriate topics. However, changes to the school curriculum and in the leadership of the department have meant that the Key Stage 3 curriculum is currently in the process of transition.
- The new subject leader recognises that planning for progression in the full range of key historical concepts and processes, including sharing the criteria for success, is not clearly identified. For example, students have insufficient opportunities to study the 'impact through time' of key themes in history. Consequently, the possibilities to fully explore change and continuity and how historians' interpretations are reshaped over time are limited.
- At Key Stage 4, and in the sixth form, students enjoy the exam specifications. On the A-level course, for example, they particularly like the variety of topics they study and the opportunity to undertake an independent enquiry of their own choice.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in history

The effectiveness of leadership and management in history is good.

- Changes in leadership structure, the introduction of a rigorous programme of quality assurance and newly appointed staff have significantly strengthened the effectiveness of the department since September. The new subject leader has made a positive start in developing the work of the department and is working well with domain (faculty) leaders and managers to redesign the curriculum at Key Stage 3.
- Students' progress is tracked regularly and their performance is carefully monitored so that additional support can be put in place when it is needed.
- Leaders and managers know the subject well. Response to identified weaknesses has been detailed, thoughtful, prompt and constructive. As a result, teaching has improved securely, with commensurate impact on achievement, and provides good evidence of the department's capacity to gain further ground.

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 challenge through increased opportunities for students to apply their developing historical knowledge to answering challenging historical questions

- providing regular opportunities for students to develop the quality of their analytical and discursive writing so that they are consistently challenged and supported to reach the highest levels
- ensuring an explicit and well-defined approach to planning for progression in subject-specific skills and extending opportunities for students to study the 'impact through time' of key themes in history
- ensuring that highly effective marking and assessment practice is applied consistently and provides routine opportunities for students to respond to teachers' verbal and written comments and engage in a dialogue of learning and assessment.

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

Karl Sampson
Her Majesty's Inspector