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Dear Mr White

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Modern Languages and English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and pupils, during our visit on 9-11 October 2006 to look at work in modern languages and English.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subjects, the visit had a particular focus for modern languages on how speaking skills are developing, as well as how information communication technology (ICT) is being used to support the development of languages generally. It also looked at the school's position in reaching the benchmarks for provision in Key Stage 4. In English it had a particular focus on the provision for poetry.

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. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of lessons.

Modern languages

The overall effectiveness of modern languages was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards in modern languages

Pupils' achievement is good.

- At GCSE, the proportion of pupils entered for the examination who attain A*/A and A*-C is well above average and has improved in recent years.
- Most pupils meet or exceed their anticipated grade.
- Results in German were better than those in French in 2005 and 2006.
- There are no persistent differences in the achievement of boys and girls in Key Stage 4.
- The proportion of pupils entered for GCSE in a French or German is below average and has fallen recently.
- At Key Stage 3, teacher assessment indicates that attainment is higher in German than in French. In French, boys' attainment is above average and girls' is below. The number of pupils attaining the higher levels is below average in both languages, indicating that some of the more able pupils are underachieving.
- Most pupils usually make good progress in lessons.
- They have a strong grasp of grammatical structures and a good range of phrases, which they use effectively, particularly when writing.

Quality of teaching and learning in modern languages

Teaching and learning are satisfactory, with several good features.

- Teachers have an extensive knowledge of how to improve pupils' performance at GCSE, which they use well to prepare their classes for the examination.
- Teachers have high expectations of pupils' ability to learn and to manipulate grammatical structures. In some classes these high expectations are reflected in an insistence that pupils' answers are accurate and in the way the teacher requires pupils to think for themselves.
- Relationships are good. Pupils have great confidence in their teachers' ability to help them to succeed. They behave well in class, volunteer answers when they can, and have responsible attitudes when working individually or in groups.
- ICT is rarely used by the teacher or pupils.
- Exercise books are marked regularly but few contain helpful guidance or targets for pupils to help them improve their work.
- In the lessons observed, there was a lack of variety and imagination in the way teachers introduced and explained new work.
- While in some lessons the foreign language was used extensively, in others it was rarely used by the teacher or the pupils.

Quality of the curriculum in modern languages

The curriculum for modern languages is good.

- The time allocated for the subject is suitable and contributes to the standards achieved.
- The timetable allows the creation of relatively homogenous groups, which makes it easier for the staff to teach their classes.
- Many pupils have the opportunity to study a second modern language, albeit briefly, and to study two modern languages to GCSE.
- The schemes of work set out clearly what is to be learned. Their content has a suitable emphasis on grammatical structures, and is relevant to the GCSE syllabus.
- The department supports a good range of extracurricular activities, including, in the past, study visits abroad. These make a strong contribution to pupils' achievement and attitudes.

Leadership and management of modern languages

Leadership and management are satisfactory.

- A stable team of specialist staff, a comprehensive set of documentation, and a departmental commitment to improvement have contributed to the steady rise in the GCSE results and an increase in the numbers studying a language in the sixth form.
- An ambitious improvement plan contains a large number of developments, though these are not based on an analysis of assessment data about pupils' achievement.
- There has been limited progress on some of the issues in the previous inspection report. In particular, access to and use of ICT have not improved.

How close the school is to reaching the benchmarks for language take-up in Key Stage 4

- The number of pupils who choose to study a modern language in Key Stage 4 is low. The great majority of pupils from middle and lower sets drop the subject at the end of Year 9. Only 27 percent of pupils in Year 11 and 29 percent in Year 10 are studying a language.
- The school has not set a benchmark for increasing participation, as expected by the Department for Education and Skills, and has no documented plans to increase take-up in Key Stage 4.

The development of speaking skills

- Pupils' pronunciation and intonation, though satisfactory, are less strongly developed than their ability to construct sentences and hold a conversation.
- In most lessons, teachers correct pupils' pronunciation errors, but do not give them enough support to master the sounds, spellings, and rhythms of the language.

Inclusion

Lower attaining pupils make at least satisfactory progress during Key Stage 3, but very few choose to continue with the subject in Key Stage 4.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- making more use of ICT for teaching and learning languages
- increasing the numbers learning modern languages in Key Stage 4
- developing the ways in which assessment is used to improve achievement.

English

The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards in English

Achievement and standards in English are good

- Standards at the end of both key stages are significantly above average. The unvalidated GCSE results for 2006 were broadly in line with previous years. The Key Stage 3 results appear to have dipped but all the papers have been sent back to the examination board for remarking.
- Data in the PANDA suggests that pupils make broadly satisfactory progress in their time in the school. However, English performs well at GCSE in relation to other departments and the school's CATs data shows that targets have been consistently achieved in English.
- Evidence from lessons observed, book sampling and discussions with pupils suggests that most pupils make good progress overall although achievement should be higher at Key Stage 3.
- Achievement in English in the sixth form is good and standards are high.

Quality of teaching and learning in English

The quality of teaching and learning in English is good.

- Test data suggests that teaching is better at Key Stage 4 than Key Stage 3; this was confirmed by the inspection and reflects in particular weaknesses in curriculum provision for younger pupils.
- Lessons observed were good overall. Positive aspects of teaching included very good relationships with pupils, clear learning objectives and good quality discussion work with pupils.
- In some lessons, teachers planned too many activities and this limited pace and led to some superficiality of treatment.
- Pupils are keen to learn and very well behaved.

- Although some marking provides good feedback to pupils about their writing, too many pupils are uncertain about how to improve their work. The department does not yet have a consistent or effective approach to curricular target setting.

Quality of curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- Strengths include a good focus on promoting reading at Key Stage 3 and good provision in lessons for speaking and listening.
- The current scheme of work at Key Stage 3 is inadequate. It fails to provide sufficient guidance and direction to the work of the department. The scheme lacks challenge, pace and progression.
- Pupils enjoy work at GCSE where the level of challenge is higher and the curriculum engages them more.
- Poetry is too little taught at Key Stage 3. This does not prepare pupils sufficiently well for the GCSE course.
- The curriculum at GCSE and post 16 is satisfactory, where a reasonable range of courses is provided for pupils.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management in English are good.

- High standards have been maintained at GCSE, pupils enjoy English and teaching is good.
- The school has a good view of strengths and weakness in the department.
- The head of department is a good classroom practitioner with the potential to influence colleagues positively.
- The Key Stage 3 scheme of work needs to be improved.
- Development planning is thorough but not linked closely enough to improvements in achievement.
- Delegation is good and all members of the team have the opportunity to contribute to developments.

Provision for poetry

Provision for poetry is satisfactory.

- Most pupils have positive attitudes towards poetry.
- Some of the teaching observed engaged pupils well through enjoyable and active approaches.
- The department promotes poetry effectively through public competitions.

- Poetry is too little represented in the current Key Stage 3 scheme of work.
- The range of approaches employed at GCSE is sometimes limited and rarely gives pupils the opportunity to write their own poems.

Inclusion

Inclusion in English is good.

- Achievement overall is good although pupils make better progress at GCSE than at Key Stage 3.
- The department enters a high proportion of pupils for English Literature at GCSE alongside English.
- Many teachers sit boys and girls together and this has a positive impact on attitudes and behaviour.
- Lessons are inclusive and give all pupils the opportunity to contribute to discussions and express their views.

Areas for improvement, which were discussed, included:-

- improving the curriculum for pupils at Key Stage 3 by providing better pace, challenge and progression within the scheme of work
- extending pupils' understanding of how to improve their work
- building poetry more strongly into the Key Stage 3 curriculum.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop modern languages and English in the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority/Local Learning and Skills Council and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Derek Neil
Her Majesty's Inspector