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Mr G Sammons
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Dear Mr Sammons

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Modern languages

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 12-13 October to look at work in modern languages.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus 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 where you are in reaching the benchmarks for provision in Key Stage 4.

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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of four lessons.

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

Achievement and standards

- Achievement and standards in modern languages are satisfactory. The percentage of students who attained A* - C in their GCSE examinations in their first foreign language, French, in 2005 was below average. This was not the whole cohort, however, and the students performed better

in French than in many other subjects. The drop in achievement in 2006 can largely be attributed to disruption in staffing. There is now greater stability in the department and students in Year 11 are making sound progress towards appropriate targets. Standards at the end of Key Stage 3 are broadly in line with national expectations overall, although there is a larger gap between the performance of boys and girls than is the case nationally.

- Attitudes towards languages are positive. Both boys and girls try hard in lessons and younger students in particular are really prepared to 'have a go'. They respond particularly well to activities which involve them fully and are interactive.

Quality of teaching and learning of modern languages

The quality of teaching and learning in modern languages is satisfactory overall with good features.

- Teachers have good relationships with students and manage behaviour in a non confrontational way. There is good use by teachers of ICT to support presentations and practice activities and lessons have a good range of activities to maintain students' interest.
- Teachers share explicit, and often challenging, learning objectives with their students. These learning objectives are appropriate but lesson delivery does not always focus clearly enough on the activities which would best help all students meet those objectives. There is occasionally too big a jump between activities so that students have insufficient opportunities and time to practise the language before they are asked to produce it independently.
- Assessment at Key Stage 4 is good. Students are given good guidance on how to improve. At Key Stage 3 not all students are clear of the level at which they are working or what they need to do improve. A good start has been made on collating marked work at different levels but the lack of description of how the work was completed makes the portfolio less accurate as a means of moderating judgements.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of curriculum is satisfactory.

- Schemes of work are appropriate but are not yet sufficiently customised to focus on the key language learning priorities. The schemes of work include a range of interactive worksheets which allow students to practise independently. There is less development of ICT to support creativity. There is a broad extra curricular offer which enriches the taught curriculum.
- The school has a commitment to diversification and shows a good level of flexibility in timetabling to ensure that pupils have a choice when they enter the school between two of the three languages on offer.

Leadership and management of modern languages

Leadership and management are good.

- The senior management team has supported the head of department well during the period of staffing disruption and as a team managed the situation carefully, aiming to minimise disruption to examination classes.
- The head of department supports her staff well in turn and has facilitated the sharing of good practice through peer observation.
- Self evaluation shows an accurate assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the subject provision but the self evaluation document and the development plan underplay the importance of the head of department as a monitor of teaching and learning in the subject.

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

- Entitlement to language study at Key Stage 4 is met. Take up has, however, dropped significantly and currently stands at around thirty percent. Although the school is exploring alternative accreditation at Key Stage 4, it has not yet formally set itself a benchmark.

The development of speaking skills

- Students show a lack of confidence when speaking. Teachers are aware of speaking as an area for development but do not always build in sufficient practice into their lessons. Pronunciation errors are corrected but there is no systematic departmental approach to teaching students the sound spelling links.

Inclusion

- All students have opportunities to learn a language throughout the school. In the lessons observed the progress of students with learning difficulties and disabilities was as good as that of their peers.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- to develop students as independent speakers of the modern language
- to improve assessment practice at Key Stage 3
- to monitor teaching, identifying areas for improvement which are specific to language teaching and learning
- to set a benchmark for language take-up at Key Stage 4 and to plan to meet that target.

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

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

Yours sincerely

Anne Looney
Her Majesty's Inspector