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Mr Whyte  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Whyte

Ofsted subject inspection programme – Music and English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Jon Lovgreen additional inspector on 07-08 February 2007 to inspect work in music and English.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the extent to which every pupil was benefiting from your music provision. In particular, it sought to explore the links you may have developed with other schools and agencies, such as the local Music Service or other professional musicians, in order to improve continuity and increase opportunity for all your pupils.

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 unless to highlight exceptional practice. In such circumstances the school would be contacted prior to publication to agree the exact wording. 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, ensembles and instrumental tuition.

## Music

The overall effectiveness of music was judged to be good.

### Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are good.

- Pupils enter school with a wide range of musical skills but with standards that are overall above average. By the end of Year 9 good teaching has ensured that their standards have improved to well above average, which constitutes good achievement. However, this good achievement masks the fact that standards dip in Year 8 because pupils do not get enough access to music lessons. This was exemplified by particularly weak singing in one Year 8 lesson. Pupils in Year 9 demonstrate excellent use of musical vocabulary and really enjoy making music together. They have excellent attitudes to learning and this contributes greatly to their achievement. Their self-confidence grows as they progress through the school and their performance skills combined with their appreciation of a wide range of music increases. They are particularly strong at working together in small groups.
- The pupils that opt to follow the GCSE course are strong performers. The good foundation they receive in Years 7 to 9 prepares them well and although they find the theoretical aspects of the course demanding, they continue to make good progress in Years 10 and 11, attaining standards that are exceptionally and consistently high. They have been taught to be good independent learners. Some have produced compositions that are of an exceptionally high standard such as an organ 'toccata' in the style of Bach and an 'air with variations' for cornet. Pupils' listening skills are not as secure as their ability to perform and compose. High levels of enjoyment result in many wishing to continue their musical studies beyond school.
- In the sixth form students' achievement is good when compared to their standards on entry to the course. Students do not need to have studied music at GCSE to be accepted on the course. They attain high standards because teaching is very secure and ensures students focus relentlessly on the examination requirements. Students are also accomplished musicians and understand how music is structured and how composers use musical devices to create particular moods and effects.
- Standards of extracurricular musical groups are broadly average. However, the school choir is of a particularly high standard and provides valuable performance opportunities that are valued by pupils and parents.

### Quality of teaching and learning of music

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Because lessons have a good focus on music making pupils learn well. Teachers have high expectations of what pupils can and should do. After some disruption to staffing the new team have a shared vision for the

department; they are highly committed, enthusiastic musicians and share their subject expertise very well with the pupils. Excellent working relationships between staff and students underpin all activities. Consequently, pupils really enjoy music lessons.

- Assessment procedures have improved since the previous inspection and teachers now have a better understanding of how well pupils are doing. Pupils also know their own levels and what they need to do to improve them. Target grades are shared with pupils but these are created and assessed against data that is not music specific. Consequently, some targets are inaccurate and result in pupils achieving higher grades in mock examinations than their targets indicate. These are not then revised in line with the pupils' musical attainment and consequently become pointless.
- The quality of the instrumental tuition is satisfactory but only a relatively low number of pupils learn to play instruments in school. More play instruments outside school but the department was not aware of this until it prepared for this inspection.

#### Quality of the music curriculum and extra-curricular provision

The overall quality of the curriculum and extra-curricular provision is satisfactory.

- Lessons are planned to be engaging and highly musical. Lessons are 45 minutes long which makes practical activities very difficult to deliver. Schemes of work cover the main elements of the programmes of study and match the needs of most pupils well. However, in Year 8 pupils only receive half the recommended time for music and this restricts the full coverage of the statutory requirements for the subject and has a noticeable impact on pupils' involvement in extracurricular musical activities and the standards they attain. In addition, higher attaining pupils receive half as much music in Year 9 because of extra language lessons. Pupils regret this reduction in time.
- Music does not have as much impact on those pupils that do not learn an instrument or opt to study GCSE music as it could. There is an adequate range of musical activities for pupils to participate in but take up is not as high as it should be. Managers are aware of this and have recently introduced a new national initiative project called 'Musical Futures'. Through this popular course, Year 9 pupils are gaining a greater insight into group work and the use of more up to date instruments such as electric guitars and drum kits.
- The 'jewel in the crown' of the extra-curricular groups is the school choir. The standard of this ensemble is high and there are regular visits to perform in the local community and at church events. Pupils really enjoy being in the choir and those who are not directly involved are nonetheless proud of it.

#### Leadership and management of music

The leadership and management of music are good.

- The good provision for music has been maintained since the previous inspection and some aspects have improved. The subject leader and senior managers have an accurate view of the strengths and areas for development of the subject. GCSE music results have been consistently high and assessment procedures, a weakness at the last inspection, have improved. Resources and accommodation have improved considerably. Music contributes well to the emotional and personal development of pupils.
- Teachers work closely together and the recent improvement in pupils' enthusiasm for the subject is as a result of the current teaching staff. While assessment has improved, target setting has some weaknesses.
- Teaching has kept up to date with developments in music education and the subject leader has an awareness of the latest national initiatives for music. Documentation is of a high standard and used consistently within the department.

### Subject issues

#### Data collection

- Links with feeder schools are poor and collection of information is inadequate. Initial information obtained as pupils enter the school is vague and does not provide a solid basis for evaluation of musical ability. The local music service provides a list of incoming instrumentalists but this is not sufficient to ascertain the musical ability of all pupils that enter the school. Record keeping systems are satisfactory and there is good recognition of previous work in lesson planning. Accurate records are kept of pupils' involvement in extra-curricular activities and the progress they make in instrumental lessons.

#### Partnerships

- The department has not established sufficient partnerships with other schools or organisations. There is an effective link with the cathedral music department and this has had a positive impact on the standard of the school choir. Links with the local authority music service are vague with instrumental teachers working in school after the school day and not having sufficient contact with the department. Unusually, there are more pupils learning instruments privately than through the school.

#### Inclusion

- The junior choir is available to any Year 7 pupil regardless of ability. Pupils are then selected for the senior choir. The GCSE course is open to pupils who have attained a reasonable standard on an instrument or voice or are willing to learn. Access to post 16 music courses is not restricted to those that have studied GCSE music. Musical events engage pupils but there are not as many opportunities as normally found in a school of this size. Consequently, whilst the department is inclusive, music does not have as much impact as it could on the lives of all the pupils in school.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that music gets sufficient curriculum time in Key Stage 3 to cover all aspects of the statutory programme of study and to allow all students equal opportunity to study music
- improving the links with other schools in order to improve the collection of data on pupils' standards and progress and use it to inform planning in order to raise standards.

## English

### Achievement & standards

Achievement and standards in English are good.

- Standards are well above average and improving in Key Stages 3 and 4, and average in the sixth form where there is some inconsistency. The very high standards in the GCSE Literature examinations reflect a much lower entry than is typical.
- Examination results for 2006 at the end of Year 9 and for GCSE show distinct improvement over those in previous years. The school has correctly identified and prioritised the need to improve results at the very highest grades in both key stages.
- Achievement is now good in Years 7-11 and satisfactory in the sixth form.
- Personal development is good. Pupils are confident and articulate both in speech and writing. They read well but wider reading is limited, even amongst more able pupils and sixth form students.

### Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Teachers have very good subject knowledge and most use this to plan carefully a range of classroom activities which are well linked to learning objectives. This leads to pupils learning quickly and with enjoyment.
- In a minority of cases, including in the sixth form, vague planning and guidance lead to dull lessons where pupils do not understand what they will learn from the activities.
- Excellent relationships, teachers' willingness to help within and beyond lesson time, and extensive marking all greatly benefit pupils, who appreciate them.

### Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- The curriculum is well planned so that pupils of differing abilities can make good progress through tasks which suit their abilities and interests.
- The extent of shared class teaching (over half the classes in Years 7 and 8 have more than one teacher) inhibits progression in learning.
- A good range of extra-curricular activities, including visits from writers and support classes, stimulates pupils' interest and achievement.
- Entry to GCSE English Literature is restricted to pupils in the higher sets.
- A good range of post-16 courses is available.

## Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are outstanding.

- The senior leadership team tackled previous weaknesses in the department with vigour and determination. Their influence has been very significant.
- The head of department gives strong leadership. Her energy and enthusiasm have stimulated teachers and pupils alike to a new confidence in, and ambition for, English.
- The department is very well organised. Its systems for checking work and standards are such that weaknesses are quickly spotted and acted on. This is reflected in demanding but very successful development planning.
- Results at both GCSE and in end of Year 9 tests rose significantly in 2006 as a result of improvements to leadership and management.

## Provision for poetry

Provision for poetry is satisfactory.

- Both pupils and teachers enjoy poetry.
- Pupils study a good range of poets and poems, many challenging.
- Whilst they are taught to analyse poems, pupils' appreciation of poetry is limited because teachers emphasise understanding over response.
- Pupils get too little opportunity to write their own poetry so that what they do produce is limited in scope and ambition.

## Inclusion

Inclusion in English is good.

- Both teachers and pupils have a very clear understanding of the standards which are being achieved. Progress at all levels is shared and celebrated.
- Vulnerable pupils are identified quickly and are well and sensitively supported. The guidance some get through marking is not always specific enough.
- There are very good strategies to tackle any identified weaknesses, such as continuing to raise the standards of some very able pupils.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- remedying weaker teaching where pupils are not clear of the purpose of what they are doing, or how it will help them improve their standards
- improving the curriculum by reducing shared classes at Key Stage 3, extending the GCSE Literature course to more pupils, and giving pupils a more creative experience of poetry
- ensuring more consistent achievement by students on post-16 courses.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop music and English 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

Anthony Briggs  
Additional Inspector