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Mr Patrick Daley
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Dear Mr Daley

Ofsted survey inspection programme- art, craft and design

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 5 and 6 March 2007 to look at work in art, craft and design.

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 are 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.

Art, craft and design

The overall effectiveness of art, craft and design was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory

- Students' achievement at GCSE has improved over the last two years but remains well below the national average. The achievement of girls is significantly above that of boys, which remains very low. Strategies to improve examination results are being implemented but have not yet achieved lasting impact. The new vocational GCSE art and design double award course is still being established; A*-C grades remain below average. Close attention is being given to monitoring students' progress to ensure that individual strengths are well matched to different course requirements.

- Students start at the school with low attainment in basic subject skills and understanding. Their imaginative work and sensitive painting compositions in Years 7 and 8, show that the majority of students make satisfactory progress overall. However, key subject skills of drawing and mark-making remain underdeveloped and restrict the maturity of their later work.
- Students' work is displayed effectively within the art rooms to promote higher achievement. The best examination work at GCSE shows that students are able to develop the strengths emerging in Year 9; imaginative composition and personal response to stimuli. Some students develop particularly sensitive work through textile design and use of painting.
- The behaviour and application shown by students in lessons during the visit was good.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory overall, with elements of good teaching.

- Lessons are well organised and the rapport between teachers and students is good. The whole school focus on 'assessment for learning' is embedded within the subject; students receive regular individual feedback from teachers during lessons. However, in some learning students take less responsibility for the direction of their work, for example, exploring media, scale and developing in-depth supporting studies.
- Teachers use information communication technology (ICT) generally well to make visual points clear. Visual aids are used effectively to explain processes. The best lessons focus on helping students to achieve learning objectives by developing and applying different skills. However, this is a variable feature of learning and some lessons concentrated too much on the completion of tasks.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory

- At Key Stage 3, the development of imaginative composition is encouraged. In response to the previous inspection, three-dimensional work has been successfully introduced. Visiting artists have been deployed effectively to improve this aspect of the curriculum. The impact on Year 9 students is good; they have created effective large scale papier-mâché constructions. However, the range of media is still narrow overall and core subject skills in particular receive insufficient attention on a regular basis.
- At Key Stage 4 there are productive links in media and IT with the nearby general further education (GFE) college; vocational GCSE students have gained experience using design software, photography and jewellery. GCSE work inspired by the local environment is also effective because research, observation, and recording skills including photography, add depth to students' supporting studies. Nevertheless, sketch books are insufficiently used as a routine tool to prepare, follow-up and develop lesson work further.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are good

- The head of subject is an effective manager of a large and complex curriculum area, which includes design and technology. Staff work closely together and some teach in both subject areas. However, the separate subject identities are unhelpfully blurred in some cases; specific targets for improvement in art, craft and design are less distinctive than those normally seen. The department review for example accurately identifies the gap in boys' achievement as a priority for action but does not provide overall a sufficiently sharp focus on refining approaches to teaching, learning and the art, craft and design curriculum as a consequence.
- Several assessment and curriculum initiatives have been initiated by the art and design specialists and are used more widely across the school; improvements to assessment tracking and monitoring of students' progress are effectively managed. The new school building is managed effectively to provide light working spaces and studios although storage of art work remains a limitation.

Inclusion

- The contribution of the subject to the inclusion of students is good. Students are supported well by teachers and learning assistants. Whole school approaches to improve literacy are being implemented in art, craft and design. Students with different abilities are supported effectively in art, craft and design lessons and through extended school opportunities. Students from minority ethnic backgrounds achieve well.
- Staff have successfully introduced alternative GCSE provision for lower attaining and 'at risk' students. This initiative is now used for other subjects throughout the school. Many of these students have complex needs and responded well in lessons.

Subject Focus: Breadth, depth and creativity of provision and outcomes

- The depth and creativity of students' work is constrained by the focus on introducing rather than developing subject skills, knowledge and understanding particularly in Years 7 and 8. However, the curriculum has broadened in Key Stage 3 and 4. In some recent work in Years 9, 10 and 11 students have shown that they are capable of pursuing depth and diversifying.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensure that the art, craft and design curriculum and teaching and learning in Years 7 to 9 develop skills, knowledge and understanding progressively to underpin students' confidence and creativity at GCSE
- accelerate improvement in achievement, particularly that of boys
- develop the use of sketchbooks in and between lessons, across all years
- strengthen the distinctive subject identity of art, craft and design.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this report will be sent to your local authority and will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Sandra Tweedie
Additional Inspector