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Mr S Wilks  
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Dear Mr Wilks

Ofsted 2006-07 survey inspection programme – history and mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with my colleague David Bain, on 12 and 13 March to look at work in history and mathematics.

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.

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 lessons.

## History

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be good.

### Achievement and standards

Standards are above average and achievement is good.

- Standards at the end of Key Stage 3 are above average. This represents good progress overall because pupils' attainment when they start at your school is average. Students have good literacy and good history skills; for example, the analysis of sources. Students' speaking skills, however, are not as good as their writing skills with many students lacking the confidence to develop oral answers at length.

- Standards at GCSE in 2006 were well above average, with 80% of students gaining a grade A\*-C. Evidence from lessons, talking to students and looking at their work supports the department's view that it is on track to meet its challenging targets for 2007.
- Students with learning difficulties and disabilities, gifted and talented students and those with English as an additional language are supported well and their achievement is also good.
- It is too soon to make firm judgements on standards in the sixth form. The department has successfully attracted a large group of well - motivated Year 12 students. These students have made a good start to their work and are on track to meet their targets. Inspection evidence suggests that their standards are above average and they are making good progress.

### Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching is good overall with some outstanding features.

- Lessons are exciting and active, with good opportunities for students to develop independence in their learning. Tasks are challenging and creative. Teachers are enthusiastic about the topics they teach and students are very keen to learn. Students talk about history being interesting, challenging and relevant and they clearly value the quality of the teaching they receive. They are particularly appreciative of the opportunities to share their ideas and discuss their work with each other.
- Teachers make particularly good use of interactive white boards and other computer technology to enhance the quality of students' learning. The department is rightly keen to make even more use of the electronic Learning Platform in order to personalise students' learning further.
- Assessment is a strong feature of the department. During discussions, students said that they knew how well they were doing in terms of levels, grades and predicted grades and they knew what to do to improve their work. Teachers' comments on their work are helpful. The department makes good use of data to identify potential under-achievers and to support high-achievers.
- Displays of students' work and other materials are very good. Many celebrate students' work while making a major contribution to learning and presenting history as relevant to present-day concerns. The display on slavery, for example, includes an impressive section on modern slavery.

### Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is good with some outstanding features.

- The Key Stage 3 curriculum meets statutory requirements and there are some very good elements within it. The Year 9 unit of work on the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, includes an oral history project on the Second World War with

students interviewing elderly family members on their experiences of life at this time. Topics are organised around 'Big Questions' such as 'did World War One really finish in 1918 or just pause for breath?'

- The GCSE course has been very well chosen to meet the interests of students and to help them develop into informed world citizens. Year 10 coursework, for example, has as its subject the issue of global terrorism following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack on the United States. Students say they particularly enjoy this topic because of its relevance and because it helps them to understand some of the motives behind terrorism.
- Students are very positive about the A-level specification offered by the school. They say they particularly appreciate the opportunity to study historical figures such as Napoleon because 'you shouldn't only study the recent past which lots of people remember anyway'.
- The curriculum is enhanced by a good programme of visits to places of interest such as Mountfitchet Castle, Belgium, and Poland.

#### Leadership and management of history

- This is a well-led department that operates very effectively as part of the humanities faculty, sharing good practice and developing common procedures.
- Self-evaluation is good and the head of department has accurately identified the subject's strengths and areas for development. This is a reflective department that is ready to take on challenge, innovation and change.
- The day-to-day running of the department is smooth and there are clearly understood procedures and routines.

#### Inclusion

There is good support in lessons for those students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities or who are at risk of under-achieving. Recent initiatives aimed at ensuring that all students can reach their potential include revision classes, support aimed at C/D borderline students and seminars for those with the ability to gain A\* grades. Sixth form students are supported well, and those who join Year 12 from other schools settle quickly and enjoy their history lessons. Support for the gifted and talented is good.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- continuing to work on the learning platform as part of the further development of personalised learning
- continuing the focus on helping students to become more confident speakers.

## Mathematics

The overall effectiveness of mathematics was judged to be outstanding.

### Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are outstanding.

- Standards in GCSE and in National Curriculum tests for Year 9 students are well above average. Students' achievement is outstanding and consistently improving. Around a third in Year 9, for example, achieved the highest Levels, 7 and 8, in 2006. Standards at GCSE in statistics are high with 90% achieving grades A\* or A in 2006.
- Results in the modular tests at AS-level were above average, with two-thirds achieving grades A to C.
- Good support from teachers and teaching assistants enables students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to make outstanding progress.
- Most students enjoy mathematics and behave very well. Many display great enthusiasm for the subject.

### Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching and learning are outstanding.

- Teachers' enthusiasm for mathematics is infectious. Almost all teaching is good and much is outstanding. Students are engaged in a wide variety of activities. Great emphasis is placed on making learning enjoyable, ensuring all are involved and developing students' confidence, whatever their ability.
- Teachers skilfully question students and encourage them to discuss their ideas and explain their reasoning. Students are encouraged to work collaboratively and they respond enthusiastically.
- Computer-linked whiteboards are being used very effectively to support teaching and demonstrate the applications of mathematics. A Year 9 class, for example, enjoyed its use in encouraging quick responses to mental questions and a Year 7 class developed a good understanding of rotational symmetry through moving shapes on the board. However, some of the more attractive interactive features are not used consistently across the department.
- Assessment procedures are excellent. Students' progress is tracked rigorously and targets are shared regularly. Students receive clear guidance on what to do to improve. The quality of marking varies, but much is exemplary.

### Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is outstanding.

- Some outstanding use is made of information and communication technology (ICT), particularly through the school and departmental websites, such as 'MathsIsFun.net'. Students are encouraged to study online and have access to many attractive resources. The department has first-rate facilities, with a suite of rooms all with computer-linked whiteboards.
- The breadth of the mathematics curriculum is good, with two groups studying statistics in Year 10 and Further Mathematics offered in Year 12. However, while the current schemes of work provide a good overview, they could be improved further by providing more detail on how to use most effectively the vast array of resources available in the department and the sharing of good practice.
- An excellent programme of enrichment and targeted intervention helps ensure effective support for students of all abilities. 'Maths Weeks', which include a mathematical 'Game Show', exemplify the department's commitment to making the subject enjoyable.
- As the core subject supporting the school's specialist status in music, very effective links are being developed with primary schools.

### Leadership and management

Leadership and management are outstanding.

- Enthusiastic and innovative leadership of a well-qualified, highly skilled team of mathematics teachers has provided a clear direction for development focused on raising attainment by making mathematics enjoyable.
- Departmental self-evaluation is very effective. Departmental leaders are aware of the strengths and areas for development. All members of the department have responsibility for leading initiatives.
- The tracking of students' progress is rigorous. The department's sophisticated systems, using ICT, have been adopted by other departments and schools.
- The department is at the forefront of developments to enable students to access 'The Virtual Learning Environment'.

### Subject issue: pupils' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

Most students enjoy mathematics. They recognise that it is important and value the high quality of the teaching they receive: 'Teachers try to make the work fun.' Many like the subject, because it can be challenging and 'helps you grow intellectually'. They enjoy 'the satisfaction of getting something right eventually,' which they may not have understood at first. Students appreciate the regular sharing of targets, which identify what they need to do to improve. They enjoy opportunities to work together and to explain their reasoning to others.

### Inclusion

Good support in lessons, an array of enrichment opportunities outside lessons and access to resources on-line, help ensure students' outstanding achievement.

Grouping students by ability is used effectively. The department has reviewed its entry requirements for courses post-16, to address the needs of different groups of students and is investigating the introduction of a non-specialist mathematics course.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- reviewing schemes of work to include greater guidance on the best use of resources and the sharing of good teaching practice
- linking schemes of work to other initiatives, such as the development of 'The Virtual Learning Environment.'

I hope these observations are of use to you as you continue to develop history and mathematics in your school.

Yours sincerely

Dr Lynn Bappa  
Additional Inspector