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Mr C Harris
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Dear Mr Harris

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Business Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 1-2 May 2007 to look at Larkmead School's work in business education.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at business studies courses, the visit had a particular focus on economic and business understanding and financial capability for all students. 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 five lessons. The overall effectiveness of business education was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

- GCSE and GCE examination results are generally below average.
- In business studies, students generally make satisfactory progress in relation to their prior attainment but there is considerable variation in the achievement of individual students. At Key Stage 4, a significant number of students achieve well, but others achieve poorly. In the sixth form, the achievement of AS level students is good, but it is mixed at A2 level. In economics, students achieve well, especially at AS level.

- At Key Stage 4, many business studies students lack confidence and their attainment is impeded by weak independent learning skills. Few students achieve the highest grades.
- Across the whole school, achievement in the growing range of enterprise, team building and problem solving activities is often good. Students' economic and business understanding by the end of Key Stage 4 is satisfactory.

Quality of teaching and learning

- Teaching and learning in business studies and economics are satisfactory.
- Business studies and economics teachers have good subject knowledge. Most lessons are well planned and those in the sixth form include a wide variety of learning opportunities which are well matched to students' needs.
- The pace of work in lessons varies widely; in one lesson students were working much too slowly and making insufficient progress. Teachers' expectations of students are much higher in the sixth form than at Key Stage 4.
- Teachers generally give appropriate emphasis to students gaining an understanding of technical vocabulary, but this is not consistent in all lessons.
- Assessment practice is good; there is a strong focus on students understanding the examination grade criteria; marking provides both clear judgements and helpful comments to encourage students to improve and students benefit from effective monitoring of their progress.
- Students' files are generally well organised but some are poorly structured or non-existent.
- Students have good access to information technology and some make effective use of it, particularly for research.
- Behaviour in lessons is mostly very good and relationships between staff and students are very positive.

Quality of curriculum

- The provision of business-related courses at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form is good.
- Consortium arrangements in the sixth form work well.
- The growing and progressive range of enterprise activities throughout the school is helping to improve students' team and problem solving skills.
- The personal, social and health education (PSHE) course provides good opportunities for students to develop financial awareness, but this currently covers only a relatively limited range of topics.
- Year 10 work experience is effective in helping students develop a range of work-related skills and improve their career planning;

logbooks are particularly effective in helping students to articulate and record their learning.

- Aim Higher activities and departments, such as art and history, are contributing positively to promoting economic and business understanding.

Leadership and management

- Leadership and management of business studies and economics are satisfactory.
- Adequate planning and review mechanisms are in place, although there are no detailed development plans for individual subjects.
- In business studies, schemes of work are adequate, although they do not identify opportunities to develop independent learning skills.
- There are some good links with local businesses, but overall these are underdeveloped.
- Staff training relies heavily on awarding body provision although some staff have taken advantage of visits to local businesses to update their knowledge.
- At whole-school level, little progress has been made in mapping how students develop economic understanding and financial capability as they move through the school and systems for tracking the outcomes achieved by individual students have yet to be put in place.

Inclusion

- Inclusion is satisfactory.
- Students with hearing impairment make good progress but students with learning difficulties are not set consistently challenging targets.
- Support for weaker students in business studies is provided through extra support sessions and mentoring.
- All students have access to the full range of business courses and other business-related activities.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- students taking GCSE business studies should be helped to improve their independent learning skills, thereby improving their self-confidence and capacity to fully access the curriculum
- in business studies, the consistency of students' learning experiences should be improved, by increasing the pace of work and expectations of students in some lessons
- the involvement of local businesses in the curriculum should be increased to help students taking business-related courses improve their knowledge and understanding
- at whole-school level, systems should be put in place to map and track students' progress in developing economic and business understanding and financial capability as they move through the school.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop business education in your 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

Vic Chivers
Her Majesty's Inspector