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Mrs C Staley
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Dear Mrs Staley

Ofsted survey inspection programme – History

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 22 and 23 May to look at work in history.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of history, the visit had a particular focus on information and communication technology (ICT).

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 you, the head of faculty, the head of department, discussions with pupils and other staff, a scrutiny of relevant documentation, an analysis of pupils' work and the observation of four lessons. Lessons in Years 7, 8 and 9 could not be observed because no history was being taught. The department is undergoing a period of change, with the arrival of a new head of faculty and a new head of department in September 2006.

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are good.

- Pupils make good progress at Key Stage 3 and recent teacher assessments for Year 9 have been markedly above national averages.

- Recent results in the GCSE examinations have been broadly average with some pupils doing significantly better. Girls do significantly better than boys. However, overall, the current progress of pupils in Key Stage 4 is good.
- At A-level, results in 2006 were higher than the national average. Again, this represents good progress.
- As a result of recent changes to teaching, the majority of pupils of all ages are making good progress. The introduction of a rigorous system of assessing pupils' progress and helping underachievers has contributed substantially.
- Pupils have good and, sometimes, outstanding attitudes to their work. Many are highly motivated and are keen to learn the subject. About 45% choose to study the subject in Year 10, significantly higher than the national average. Numbers who opt for the subject in the sixth form are rising.

Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching and learning are good, enabling pupils to make good progress.

- Teachers have good knowledge of their subject and of examination requirements. They use this well to extend the pupils' knowledge and understanding of, for example, the rise of Chartism in the 1830s.
- Lessons are well planned and activities are suitably challenging for different groups of pupils. Teachers know the needs of pupils well and target work accordingly, including the use of more precise questioning for various groups and individuals to extend their understanding.
- Pupils respond well to the teaching. They work well together. Many can concentrate for sustained periods and they engage in group work in a mature and sensible manner. The discussion work of some pupils in Year 10 who were interpreting different sources of evidence for the Reichstag Fire was of a high standard.
- Lessons are characterised by good relationships. Teachers have a friendly but firm manner and pupils respond well to the relaxed style. Humour is often used to good effect.
- Activities are usually well paced. Pupils are regularly reminded of how much time they have for particular tasks. Time is used well. There are good examples of the use of whole-class teaching points to clear up misunderstandings on the part of pupils and for teachers to issue further guidance to them.
- Pupils' work is routinely marked. Teachers offer some useful feedback but the use of this is inconsistent. Some good comments are made for older pupils and sixth formers to help them to improve their work, particularly for the more able. However, marking at Key Stage 3 is not always helpful to the pupils. Targets for improvement are not routinely made explicit. Levels of attainment are indicated but there is no explanation of how these have been arrived at, or what the pupil needs to do to improve.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good but because of its organisation leads to challenges for both staff and pupils.

- At Key Stage 3, pupils study history as part of humanities. The time for the subject rotates with geography and religious education.
- The rotation arrangements at Key Stage 3 mean that pupils do not study the subject for relatively lengthy periods. Although it is not harming pupils' progress, it results in a disjointed learning experience which teachers and pupils have to work hard to address.
- Schemes of work are in the process of being reviewed and strengthened. It is anticipated that this will give better coherence to the pupils' learning experiences, and to further aid continuity and progression for them.
- Visits to places of historical interest have been limited in the past. The situation is improving with more visits planned, for example to Warwick Castle.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the department are good.

- The head of department has a clear and accurate understanding of strengths in the department and areas that need further improvement. He is supported extremely well by the new head of humanities. Morale and teamwork within the department are high.
- Appropriate priorities for improvement have been identified and these are being acted upon. For example, the department is aware of the need to change AS and A-level study units to improve students' engagement.

Subject issue: ICT

The school has plans to expand the use of ICT within the subject as part of its specialist status in technology. At the moment, only one history classroom has an interactive whiteboard. In the scrutiny of pupils' work, there was some evidence of the use of ICT. However, this was limited to the use of word-processing skills, or the downloading of some information from the Internet. Most pupils stated that they use ICT more at home than they do in school, although sixth formers were happy with their access to ICT within the school. Much more work remains to be done in improving the use of ICT in history.

Inclusion

Inclusion in history is good.

- Teachers know well the needs of pupils who have learning difficulties or disabilities. They set appropriate work for them.
- Planning usually takes into account the needs of the lower attainers and those who are gifted and talented. The varied approaches ensure that pupils make appropriate progress.
- Individual education plans are used and teachers know what the targets are. However, these targets relate to pupils' basic skills and/or their behaviour rather than to specific history targets.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving the performance of boys in the GCSE examinations
- improving the quality of marking and assessment at Key Stage 3 so that it helps all pupils to make better progress
- increasing the use of ICT within the teaching and learning of history, especially in the main school.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop history 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 the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Champak Chauhan
Her Majesty's Inspector