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Mrs J Lancaster-Smith
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Lancaster-Smith

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and for the help of your staff and pupils, during my visit on 24 September 2007 to look at work in modern languages.

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.

Schools are expected to provide an entitlement for all pupils in Key Stage 2 to learn a modern language by 2010. As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the progress the school is making towards entitlement.

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 three lessons.

The school's introduction of modern languages has been hampered by some critical staff changes and by managers' understandable decision to focus their attention on the pressing need to improve pupils' basic skills.

Achievement and standards

- Pupils can say a small number of single words and short phrases but seldom manipulate the language to create their own sentences.
- Their pronunciation and intonation are poor.

- They copy-write and read with some accuracy but do so rarely and usually only single words.
- Their ability to retain what they have learned is weak; pupils, for example, who have learned French for two or three years have an insecure grasp of basic items such as numbers.
- They have a poor understanding of the meaning of some of the vocabulary they have been taught.
- Pupils' progress to date has been slow largely because of weaknesses in the way the modern languages curriculum has been planned.
- Pupils have positive attitudes to the subject and have some appreciation of the reasons why it is important to learn other languages.

Quality of teaching and learning in modern languages

- Lessons are planned very well. Learning objectives are clear and suitable. Activities are well matched to them. The level of difficulty is appropriate for pupils' ability. Resources are well chosen and carefully prepared to ensure the lessons run smoothly.
- Lessons are varied and contain a good number of enjoyable activities, designed to make pupils participate as much as possible. Particularly effective in attracting pupils' interest and involvement during the visit was the use of songs, competitive games, and DVD footage of real French youngsters.
- Teachers use praise, encouragement and reward to good effect. Consequently pupils behave well and try hard.
- Pupils respond positively to the teaching. They concentrate and are keen to volunteer answers. They work well, particularly when they are in pairs and are clear what the task requires of them. Most say they enjoy the subject.
- Teachers' subject knowledge has some shortcomings, particularly their pronunciation and intonation.
- Teachers and pupils do not speak enough French in lessons.
- Some teaching does not ensure that pupils understand the meaning of the words they are meant to be learning.
- At times lessons flag a little when the teacher is explaining something to the whole class or waiting for individuals to answer a question.
- Teachers check on pupils' progress in lessons, but the school's plans to make assessment and recording more formal are at an early stage.

Quality of curriculum

- The adoption in the past of different curriculum models under different leadership means that pupils' experience of learning French has lacked coherence. Several pupils in Year 6, for example, have covered the same topics several times.

- The modern languages curriculum is now at an experimental stage. There is therefore as yet no curriculum plan or scheme of work to set out the content for each year group.
- The lack of an agreed plan means there is no basis for continuity and progression in important areas such as pupils' grammatical and intercultural understanding.
- Nonetheless, the school has a very clear vision of a future in which language learning will be an integral part of the whole curriculum. It has a sound model for delivering this plan; each teacher in Key Stage 2 takes responsibility for teaching their own class in a dedicated, if short, weekly lesson.

Leadership and management of modern languages

- Progress with the subject has been intermittent in the past, partly because of staff changes and partly because the school has rightly been concerned about the need to concentrate on tackling pupils' low achievement in basic skills.
- You now have a strong commitment to establishing languages successfully in the school.
- You have a very good understanding of the subject's strengths and weaknesses and of the challenges that lie ahead.
- The subject development plan is very thorough and detailed. It presents an ambitious programme for the future. It recognises the importance of dealing with crucial issues, such as staff development and improving the use of information and communication technology.
- The school is careful to take into account staff's and pupils' perspectives. Audits of staff's skills and of pupils' attitudes, for instance, have been conducted recently.
- Some progress has been made with implementing the plan. However, it is too early for it to have had an impact on staff's skills or pupils' achievement.

Implementing languages entitlement

- Implementing entitlement is satisfactory.
- All classes in Key Stage 2 now get a regular timetabled lesson.
- There is a comprehensive development plan which sets out the intended actions in all the important areas over the next year or so.
- Staff have made contact this term with key staff in other institutions, including the local authority and the partner secondary school.
- The staff are committed to making the subject successful, but the initiative is at a very early stage.

Inclusion

- All pupils in Key Stage 2 have equal access to learning French.

- Teachers show some thought to supporting pupils who miss lessons through absence and for other reasons.
- While achievement is low overall, there is no discernible difference in the achievement of different groups of pupils.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- preparing a curriculum plan for languages in Key Stage 2
- improving staff's subject knowledge, particularly their pronunciation, and their understanding of good languages teaching
- agreeing arrangements for transition in the subject with the partner secondary school.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop languages in the school.

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

Yours sincerely

Derek Neil
Her Majesty's Inspector