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11 December 2007

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Dear Mr Lloyd

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and for the help of your staff and pupils, during my visit on 3-4 December 2007 to look at work in modern languages.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on how reading skills are developing and how reading is used to develop language skills. It also looked at where you are in reaching the benchmarks for provision in Key Stage 4.

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 pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of modern languages was judged to be satisfactory with some good features.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory.

- The number of pupils entered for GCSE is very low. Of those who are entered, above average proportions secure an A*-C grade. Last year the percentage who gained an A*/A was about average. On the whole,

these pupils perform as well in modern languages as in their other subjects, although last year about a third of them did not achieve their target in French.

- A number of the more able pupils take a GCSE in Years 9 and 10; many pass at A*-C but last year just under a half did not meet their target grade.
- Standards at the end of Key Stage 3 last year were below average; given their attainment on entry this was slow progress for many pupils. Pupils currently in Key Stage 3 are making more rapid progress.
- Pupils' extended writing is good. They use a good range of vocabulary and structures to make their writing more sophisticated, for example by using different connectives and tenses.
- They do not speak the language very accurately or with much confidence. Their pronunciation and intonation are barely satisfactory, especially in French.
- When they hear the teacher speak the foreign language they do not readily understand what has been said.

Quality of teaching and learning in languages

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory with good features.

- Lesson planning is very detailed. Learning objectives are clear and suitable. Well designed activities ensure the objectives are met. The careful timing of activities and preparation of materials help ensure the lessons run smoothly.
- Lessons have a firm structure that includes a helpful warm-up activity to recapitulate prior learning and a brief final plenary that enables the teacher to assess the overall progress of the class. Pupils' understanding and skills are developed progressively with each stage of the lesson.
- Teachers have high expectations of what pupils should achieve. The pace and content of lessons are quite demanding.
- The emphasis of the lessons is on getting the pupils to work independently; this results in learning that is always at least satisfactory.
- Assessment is good. Pupils' work is marked up to date, and corrections give precise guidance about how the work can be improved. Pupils are set demanding targets, based on regular formal assessments, and are aware of what they need to do in their work to achieve these.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge. They know the requirements of the national curriculum and of the GCSE examinations and can help pupils achieve high levels and grades.
- Teachers use the interactive white board with confidence to present new learning and to model how to carry out written tasks.
- Pupils behave well and apply themselves assiduously in class.

- Teachers speak English too much in class and pupils have too few opportunities to speak the foreign language. This results in deficiencies in pupils' speaking and listening skills.
- On occasion, work is pitched too high for some of the least able in the class.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- The organisation and time allocation for the subject in Key Stage 3 are adequate. All classes have a specialist teacher.
- The scheme of work is heavily based on the grammar and structures needed for success at GCSE. Its emphasis is largely on developing pupils' writing. It does not specify how other skills are to be taught, or how pupils' pronunciation will be developed.
- Opportunities for pupils to use information and communication technology are limited.
- The department organises a satisfactory amount of enrichment activities, including study visits to France and Germany and additional classes to enhance pupils' chances at GCSE.
- The policy of entering some pupils for GCSE modules at the end of Years 9 and 10 produces teaching groups with a wide diversity of needs for which it is difficult to devise a coherent teaching programme. The school recognises this problem and is considering modifications to the curriculum for the future.
- The subject does not have any curriculum links with the school's specialism in science and engineering.

Leadership and management of languages

Leadership and management are satisfactory.

- The two subject leaders work well together to ensure a consistent approach to planning, teaching and assessment across the two languages.
- The evaluation of the department's performance lacks rigour. Staff do not use data to identify strengths and weaknesses. They do not focus their analysis on the progress made by the pupils.
- The department's transformation plan contains a number of important and relevant developments, such as the investigation of alternative accreditation schemes. However, because of the lack of robust self evaluation it omits several crucial areas, such as raising achievement in Key Stage 3, increasing participation levels in Key Stage 4, and improving pupils' speaking skills.

How close the school is to reaching the benchmarks for language take-up in Key Stage 4

- Numbers opting for languages in Key Stage 4 are low and, save for an increase in the current Year 11, steadily declining.
- The school has no written benchmarks or firm plans to reverse the trend, but has begun work on restructuring the curriculum for next year and investigating alternative forms of accreditation.

The development of reading skills and how well reading is used to develop language skills

The development of reading skills is satisfactory.

- Specially written texts are used well to develop pupils' understanding of language structures and as a model for their own writing.
- Reading does not feature in the scheme of work. It plays little part in developing pupils' intercultural understanding, speaking skills, or pleasure in learning the language.
- Pupils can read short passages satisfactorily for gist and for detail. Their ability to understand texts fully is restricted by a poor grasp of some basic structures; several in Key Stage 3, for instance, do not understand the meaning of the subject pronouns.

Inclusion

Inclusion is satisfactory.

- A significant minority of pupils is disapplied from the subject in Years 7 and 8 so they can concentrate on developing their literacy and numeracy skills.
- Most pupils are well supported by the teacher in lessons, though the lowest attainers in Key Stage 3 have limited understanding and find the work difficult.
- The department does not analyse the achievement of different groups of learners.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving pupils' speaking skills, especially their pronunciation
- evaluating the department's performance more rigorously in terms of pupils' progress
- planning to recruit greater numbers to study the subject in Key Stage 4
- introducing pupils to a broader range of texts for reading.

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