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Miss M Keelan
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Dear Miss Keelan

Ofsted Subject Inspection Programme – Music

Thank you very much for your assistance and hospitality and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 17-18 October 2007.

At the end of the inspection I fed back my judgements and this letter is to confirm my findings. As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the extent to which every student is benefiting from your music provision. It also explored the links you have developed with other colleges and agencies, such as the local Music Service.

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 unless to highlight exceptional practice. In such circumstances the college would be contacted prior to publication to agree the exact wording. 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 members of staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of lessons and extra-curricular activities.

As we discussed during the inspection and in the feedback meeting, whilst the overall effectiveness of music is satisfactory overall, there are some issues that require significant improvement in order for students to make further progress in their musical development.

Achievement and Standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory overall.

- When students join the college in Year 7, their musical attainment and experiences are well below national standards. Students make satisfactory progress during Key Stage 3, although standards remain below average.
- Standards at GCSE are exceptionally low although residual results for 2006 (the latest available) indicate that students' achievement in music is in line with what they achieve in their other subjects. While AS and A Level standards are below average, students' progress is broadly satisfactory in the sixth form.
- Students who take receive additional instrumental tuition and who participate in ensemble music-making activities make better progress and thoroughly enjoy themselves, showing greatly increased levels of self-esteem. These activities make a good contribution to the college's work and reputation in the local community.
- While there are opportunities for individual students to use their voices in class and there is regular whole-school singing in liturgical events, vocal work is underdeveloped.

Quality of teaching and learning

The overall quality of teaching and learning in lessons is satisfactory.

- Teachers have good subject skills, particularly in musical performance. They have good working relationships with the vast majority of students. Students are quick to praise the time and effort given by their teachers.
- Teaching was at least satisfactory in nearly all curriculum lessons seen during this inspection, with an appropriate emphasis on practical music-making which is enjoyed by students. However, lessons are planned around the completion of standard tasks for all rather than building on and extending each student's prior learning of musical skills and knowledge. As a result, more able students are not always challenged sufficiently and students with learning difficulties find some tasks too complex. This sometimes leads to inappropriate behaviour by a small minority.
- The good ICT facilities are used by students with increasing confidence; however, there is still too much emphasis placed on instructing students about the mechanics of the ICT programmes and not enough emphasis on how students can use ICT independently, creatively, and expressively.
- Teaching and musical leadership of ensemble activities are good, with teachers modelling effectively through directing and performing. In the instrumental lesson observed, expert modelling helped students make good progress.

Quality of the music curriculum and extra-curricular provision

The overall quality of the curriculum and extra-curricular provision is inadequate.

- The Key Stage 3 curriculum plan details the activities to be taught but does not consider the skills, knowledge and understanding to be learnt progressively by students as they move through Years 7-9.
- Statutory requirements are met and an appropriate breadth of musical styles is covered. However students would welcome more investigation of music from different traditions as they feel there is too much emphasis on Western Art Music.
- The college has recently introduced a new BTEC course in addition to GCSE music and sees this as an opportunity to increase participation, personalise learning, and improve exam results. However, neither the GCSE nor the BTEC courses are planned in sufficient detail. Double-option time has been allocated for the BTEC course, which could be worth the equivalent of two or four GCSE grades, but there is not yet a curriculum plan in place to ensure that students engage with the full complement of guided learning hours recommended for successful completion of the course.
- The programme of instrumental tuition includes opportunities for students to learn strings, brass, woodwind, and guitar. The wind band performs in the local community and enjoys an annual tour to Europe. Opportunities are provided for rock bands to rehearse and perform in school. A varied range of visits to local professional performances enhances the experiences of GCSE and A level students. This programme is greatly appreciated by students. However, there are few additional opportunities for students to develop their vocal skills and students say that they would particularly like to have opportunities to perform in musical theatre productions.

Leadership and management of music

The overall quality of leadership and management is satisfactory.

- The music department runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis. The accommodation and resources are kept in satisfactory order. The instrumental teaching programme is well-managed and there is good leadership of musical ensembles; the assistant teacher of music plays a strategic musical role in the liturgical life of the school.
- The subject leader has received appropriate training for the new BTEC course and has established links with the examination board and another local provider that will support further training. Other continuing professional development opportunities in music are less developed, and there is limited awareness of other national initiatives and strategies.

- The department has clear priorities for further improvement but the emphasis is on extra-curricular activities. Not enough attention is given to improving whole-class teaching and learning through the curriculum.
- The governors and senior leadership team value the importance of music to the life and esteem of the school, and show commendable commitment by fully funding instrumental tuition and ensemble activities to the tune of £20,000 a year. However, the monitoring of teaching and the curriculum has not been rigorous enough and has not helped to raise standards in the curriculum.

Subject issues: Data collection and partnerships

- The 2007 Key Stage 3 teacher assessments indicated that attainment was in line with national expectations; however, they were too generous and were not accurately pitched against the published level descriptors. This was because assessments were made against participation in or completion of activities, rather than against the quality of students' work.
- There are increasing links with local primary schools through the extra-curricular activities. However, there are no curriculum links with primary schools.
- There is a well-established partnership with another school to provide A Level teaching for students from a cluster of five local schools. Whilst there is clarity about which element of the course is taught in which school, there is not enough rigour or detail in the medium and short term planning to assure continuity of provision or to allow for sufficiently rigorous monitoring of teaching and student achievement.
- There are well-established links with the Wolverhampton Music School involving the active participation of the Head of Music and students in additional ensemble activities.

Inclusion

- The financial commitment made by governors to fully funding all instrumental tuition means that this provision is accessible by all students, whatever their circumstances, and it means that students are selected for tuition on the basis of their need and aptitude.
- However, not enough is done to ensure that curriculum planning reflects the full ability range and provides learning opportunities that stretch the most able and support those with learning difficulties and disabilities.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed and agreed, included:

- giving priority to curriculum provision and teaching for all in the music department's development plans
- placing an emphasis on the progression of students' skills, knowledge and understanding in Key Stages 3 and 4 curriculum plans so that teaching focuses on students' learning rather than the activities to be completed

- ensuring that, in partnership with the other providing school, the A Level course is planned in sufficient detail to provide clear guidance for staff and students about course and lesson content on a yearly, termly, and weekly basis
- developing singing, both in the curriculum and through wider ensemble opportunities.

I very much hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop music in your college.

A copy of this feedback will be sent to your local authority, will be available to the next institutional inspection team, and will be published.

In 6-12 months after the inspection visit, we would like to gather information on the impact of this inspection on the improvements in this subject in your college. To this end you may be contacted by telephone or sent a questionnaire to complete. We appreciate your co-operation in this evaluation.

Yours sincerely

Mark Phillips
Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools