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04 October 2007

Mr N Hutchinson
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Dear Mr Hutchinson

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and those of your staff and pupils, during my visit on 27-28 September to look at work in modern languages (ML).

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

The overall effectiveness of ML was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' achievement is good.

- Standards are broadly average in Key Stage 3. This represents good achievement in relation to their starting points.

- The percentage of pupils attaining A*-C at GCSE is average and improving.
- Very few pupils achieve A*/A grades.
- The school's data indicates that there is no significant difference between the performance of boys and girls.
- Most pupils make good progress in lessons. They have a sound understanding of grammatical structures and the rules of pronunciation, and a good range of vocabulary. High attaining pupils use a wide range of structures and expressions in their extended writing.
- Pupils use their reading skills to good effect to increase the range of language they use in their own speaking and writing and to increase their understanding of patterns in the language.
- Pupils enjoy the subject and their behaviour in class is exemplary. They have very good relationships with their teachers and carry out their work responsibly and with care.

Quality of teaching and learning of modern languages

Teaching and learning are good.

- Planning is thorough and results in well structured and well organised lessons, with manageable steps in learning so that pupils build effectively on previous learning.
- Teachers have high expectations of the pupils' behaviour and of the pace with which the pupils are expected to work.
- Each lesson includes a good variety of activities, relevant to its aims.
- Teachers' presentations and explanations are clear so that pupils rapidly understand new language and use it themselves.
- Teachers use the target language effectively to conduct activities. As a result, pupils benefit from excellent role models and their listening skills are well developed. Higher attaining pupils are effectively challenged to interpret some unfamiliar or more complex language for others.
- Question/answer techniques do not always ensure pupils are able to respond successfully. This leads to some reluctance amongst pupils to participate in whole class activities
- Pupils are given opportunities to practise new language informally and this results in increased confidence and competence. However, there is scope to provide more opportunities for them to do this and to use the language for real purposes.
- The teaching does not always meet well enough the needs of the higher and lower attaining pupils particularly in speaking and listening tasks.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum for modern languages is satisfactory.

- Schemes of work provide detailed information of what is to be taught and ensure continuity and progression. However, there is too little information about how the needs of groups of differing ability, particularly the most and least able, are to be met.
- The time allocated to the subject is about average, but some unevenness in timetabling over a two week schedule hampers the progress of a small number of pupils.
- Although Spanish is offered from scratch to all pupils in Key Stage 4, only one pupil has opted to take up this option. At present there is no taster course in Spanish in Key Stage 3 so it is not possible for pupils to make an informed choice.
- The recently introduced 'Pathways' curriculum is having a positive impact upon the take up of languages in Key Stage 4.

Leadership and management of modern languages

Leadership and management are good.

- There is a thorough analysis of performance in modern languages. This forms the basis for self evaluation and strategic planning.
- Departmental self evaluation is effective. The Head of Department has a clear understanding of strengths and weaknesses and has identified appropriate priorities for improvement.
- Appropriate targets are set and pupils are increasingly involved in tracking and planning their own progress towards these targets.
- Standards are improving steadily year on year. There has been an increase in the proportion of pupils gaining B grades and all candidates achieve a grade at GCSE. However, very few candidates achieve the highest grades.
- There is a high level of consistency across the department. Teachers work very well as a team and meet regularly to plan and to discuss methodology.
- There is scope to further develop links with primary feeder schools in order to better ensure continuity and progression for pupils joining the school and who have begun studying a language in Year 6.
- In work seen standards at the end of Key Stage 3 are broadly average. This does not match with teacher assessments which indicate that standards are well below average. There is a need to review the way assessment criteria are applied.

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

- Only 38 percent of pupils in Years 10 and 11 are studying a language this is a slight increase over previous years. Very few boys opt to continue with a language in Key Stage 4.
- The school has plans to increase take-up in Key Stage 4 through the new 'Pathways' curriculum implemented in September 2007 and through the provision of a second language in Key Stage 4.

The development of reading skills

This is good.

- Teachers place an appropriate emphasis on reading skills in lessons.
- Pupils are able to understand and translate what they are set to read.
- They skim for general understanding and can scan for specific information.
- They are able to use context, clues (e.g. pictures, headlines) and their knowledge of English or other languages to work out meaning.
- They 'interpret' for others.
- They are fairly confident when reading aloud; their pronunciation does not hinder communication.
- Pupils are able to re-use language they have read in speaking and writing tasks. However, opportunities are missed for pupils to reconstruct texts orally before seeing the original.
- Although pupils use sites on the Internet to find out cultural information, there are few opportunities for pupils to read for pleasure.
- Text is used to improve pupils' pronunciation and knowledge of grammar; it is used well as a 'cue' for speaking and writing.

Inclusion

- All pupils take a modern language in Key Stage 3 and have the option to do so in Key Stage 4.
- Low attaining pupils have difficulty with listening tasks because they have insufficient support to complete tasks successfully.
- Pupils are sometimes too dependent upon teachers to complete tasks. This hampers their progress in some lessons.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving GCSE results, with particular regard to the number of A*/A grades
- increasing the opportunities pupils are given to use the language themselves informally for practice and for real purposes and thereby improving their confidence and independence in manipulating the language spontaneously

- ensuring lower attaining pupils are given sufficient support to complete tasks successfully in lessons without the direct intervention of the teacher.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop modern 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

Judith Tolley
Additional Inspector