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Mr D Farmer
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Dear Mr Farmer

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and pupils, during my visit on 30-31 October 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 nine lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are outstanding.

- By the end of Key Stage 3 pupils are working well above the nationally expected level. They are able to use a range of tenses; they speak with confidence, good pronunciation and are mostly accurate. Test results indicate that the current Year 9 will do at least as well as previous cohorts.

- In 2007, standards in Key Stage 4 were well above the national average and achievement was good in both French and outstanding in German. 76% of pupils achieved in line with or better than would be expected given their scores at Key Stage 3 and in German nearly half of pupils achieved above the level that was predicted. This was especially true of pupils in the middle ability range. However, the number of A* grades was less than the national figure in both languages.
- The excellent assessment and tracking system used by the department indicates that current pupils in both Years 10 and 11 are on course to do better than previous years. Achievement of the current cohort is very good in both languages. Pupils are able to speak and write very well because teachers have focussed on this aspect intensively. Their listening and reading is good but it is mostly based on the text book and there is little extended reading or listening available, although they do enjoy watching films occasionally.
- In AS standards were good but in A2 numbers were too small to make valid comparisons with national averages. Current pupils are achieving well. Pupils in lessons were able to talk and write on a range of controversial topics, including cloning, homelessness and animal testing, using complex and accurate language. They often read articles from the internet and newspapers or magazines but say that they do not often work on fictional texts.
- At all levels pupils are well aware of the usefulness of learning a language and know that it is important when applying for higher education courses or a job. Pupils enjoy learning a language and think they are well taught; they are pleased to be learning a language in Key Stage 4.

Quality of teaching and learning in ML

Teaching and learning are excellent.

- Teachers have excellent subject knowledge and so provide a good model for pupils, especially at Advanced Level.
- Teachers mostly use French or German for instructions in class and pupils are always clear what they are expected to do.
- Working relationships between staff and pupils are respectful and pupils behave very well.
- Activities are well chosen, especially in German. They match the abilities of the pupils and more able pupils are expected to work from memory and to do extension activities. Pace is good and teachers use many games and competitions to keep pupils interested. For example, in one lesson pupils had to beat the teacher to read a passage aloud.
- Pupils make good use of the extra help that is available to them outside class time from teachers and the foreign language assistants.
- The teachers know the examination syllabus very well and prepare students extremely well. Pupils have revision sessions with both

teachers and the foreign language assistants which focus especially on coursework and the oral examination and they do especially well in these areas.

- Pupils are expected to complete a lot of work in class and they participate well. They are given plenty of speaking practice and they participate diligently.
- Pupils regularly use computers to improve their language skills and to find out information from the internet. The school website gives pupils opportunities to practice at home and to listen to sound files in order to hear a correct version of an answer to an oral question.
- Pupils are given very good feedback on their performance; they are very aware of how they can improve their work and they know precisely how they are doing and what grades they can expect. They are given regular tests and any dips in performance are discussed with pupils and their parents.
- Pupils with special needs are helped by assistants who work in the classroom with them.
- Sixth form pupils are given a good introduction to the course in Year 12 and they feel that they are helped well to cope with the change in demands of the Advanced Level syllabus.
- At Key Stages 3 and 4, pupils do not systematically read or listen to extended or authentic texts beyond those available in the text book. There are few resources available for this.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- Pupils have the choice of French or German at all Key Stages. Almost every pupil studies at least one language in Key Stage 4. They can study two languages in Key Stage 4 by doing one after school but numbers are small. This year there are six pupils in Year 10 who are doing this and eleven in Year 11.
- All pupils from this school study for the GCSE and pupils from the local special school, who are taught by staff from Plymstock school, are preparing for the ASDAN award.
- There are trips and exchanges for both languages which are well subscribed and help pupils to develop their language skills and understanding of different cultures.
- There is a foreign language assistant for each language and they work with pupils to improve oral and written skills.
- Pupils have regular access to ICT which helps them to improve their vocabulary, for example, but they say they would like even more access so that they can read more authentic materials.
- Pupils who speak another language are enabled to take an examination; for example, last year two pupils took a GCSE in Chinese.
- Pupils and staff study Spanish in an after-school club.

- Gifted and talented pupils are given the opportunity to attend local events where they can try other languages and work with the foreign language assistant.
- The school has been heavily involved in training local primary teachers and teaching of primary pupils so there is a good understanding of what pupils have achieved. The staff have adapted the Year 7 curriculum to focus on areas that have not been covered in primary schools, such as writing, and to take account of pupils' aptitude in languages when placing them into sets in Year 7.

Leadership and management of ML

Leadership and management are outstanding.

- The department has moved from being one that was underperforming to one that is now achieving very high standards. This is because there has been a very clear focus on improving results.
- The school's excellent assessment and tracking system allows potential problem areas to be identified early and these issues are then effectively and swiftly addressed. For example, last year the tracking system showed that some groups of pupils studying French were not doing as well as they should in speaking and writing. Procedures were put into place to ensure that these pupils rewrote their coursework during school time until it reached the required standard. Pupils were also given extra help with their oral examination practice, resulting in significant improvements in pupils' performance and the school attained its best ever set of results for French GCSE.
- The department is very well supported by senior managers who understand how important language learning can be for pupils and who encourage the department to make links with other areas of the curriculum such as business and enterprise.
- The department works well with other local schools, including local primary schools, and staff are often invited to lead training sessions. There are also very strong links with the local special school and pupils, who are taught French by staff from this school, are making very good progress.

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

- Almost all pupils study one language at GCSE from a choice of French or German and a small number study two languages by attending after school sessions.
- Although a language is technically an option for pupils entering Key Stage 4, almost every pupil chooses to do so. Therefore, the school does not run an alternative as it is not viable.

- Pupils say they enjoy learning languages and they say that as they have been learning a language for so long, many since they were at primary school, they feel it is important to continue.

The development of reading skills

Reading skills are well developed.

- In Key Stage 3 pupils are aware of different strategies for understanding texts, such as using cognates and similarities with other languages. In one German lesson the teacher made this very explicit by asking pupils to note on a grid what strategies they had used.
- Reading texts are regularly used as a model for writing activities, for example, pupils wrote an account of a film following one they had read about.
- Pupils generally have good pronunciation when reading aloud as teachers use a lot of the foreign language and so pupils regularly hear the correct version.
- Pupils are sometimes taught about the relationship between sounds and spellings but this is not systematic and opportunities are missed to reinforce this, such as when pupils continually mispronounced the German word 'weil' in one lesson and were not encouraged to eliminate common mistakes such as silent final consonants in a French passage they were reading aloud.
- Pupils have access to dictionaries when they need them but they are not often used below the sixth form.
- There are some books and magazines which pupils can read for pleasure but this is not often part of a lesson.

Inclusion

Inclusion is good.

- The tracking system is very effective and ensures that problems are identified early and consequently many pupils achieve very well indeed.
- Pupils with learning difficulties achieve well because they are supported well in class.
- Able pupils are given challenging work which they enjoy but few currently achieve the very highest grade at GCSE.
- Gifted and talented pupils are given the opportunity to attend local events where they can try other languages and work with the foreign language assistant.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- encouraging pupils to read and listen to texts from a wider range of sources

- continuing to explore ways to increase the links between languages and other subjects, such as the specialist subject of sports.

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

Joanna Peach
Additional Inspector