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Dear Ms Gregory

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 3-4 December 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.

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 five lessons.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory overall.

- Very few pupils took a GCSE examination in languages in 2007. Whilst results in French are broadly in line with national averages, only 10 pupils took the exam. A small number of pupils took exams in other languages, and in years other than Year 11. Apart from in Spanish, all pupils achieved a grade at C or above.
- At Key Stage 3 pupils' results in recent years have been well below national averages. Departmental analysis has demonstrated inadequate

progress at Key Stage 3. The school has now judged that its assessment procedures are inaccurate and inconsistent across teaching staff and that this has contributed to pupils' poor results. A priority this year has been to raise standards and develop assessment strategies to support this. Targets for 2008 have been raised appropriately.

- In the Key Stage 3 work seen during the inspection, pupils are now making satisfactory progress, and this is also true of the Year 10 group observed.
- Pupils are now responding well to recent measures introduced to interest them, and value the choice between two languages at the end of Year 7. This has raised their motivation and Year 8 pupils, for example, are enjoying work in their chosen language.
- When given the opportunity, they enjoy working independently and finding things out for themselves. Many speak positively of their work in languages.

Quality of teaching and learning in ML

The quality of teaching and learning is good overall.

- Lessons are characterised by good planning, with objectives shared clearly with pupils. Language teachers are beginning to develop good plenary activities to consolidate learning.
- Relationships between pupils and teachers are good. Teachers are enthusiastic about language-learning and they communicate this well.
- The department's current drive to improve standards, through clearer assessment procedures, has the potential to improve pupils' learning. Teachers now share details of attainment levels and ways of improving with their pupils and are keen that this should underpin learning. There is still inconsistency across the department.
- Teachers know their pupils well, and use whole-school information to ensure that they match work well to pupils' needs.
- Resources are good, and teachers use interactive whiteboards (IWB) well to present new language to their pupils in a lively way. Pupils were not observed using the IWB interactively.
- Teachers are also building up new paper-based materials for pupils, and are aware of the need to ensure clarity of visual stimuli.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory overall.

- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is now good. Pupils learn two languages in Year 7 – French and either German or Spanish – and then choose which language they wish to continue with at the end of the year. The school manages parental requests well, in order to ensure that pupils make the right choices. Motivation in Years 8 and 9 is strong, and this is reported to show improvement on previous years.

- Accreditation is planned for the current Year 9, and it is anticipated that this will motivate pupils further in this final year of the key stage, and encourage them to continue to GCSE with their language.
- Whilst pupils' entitlement to study languages into Key Stage 4 is met, few do so. There is currently no alternative to GCSE accreditation, and few pupils take up the vocational languages option in the sixth form.
- Pupils are, however, encouraged to take GCSE examinations in their home or heritage languages, and these yield good results.
- A small number of pupils study languages as part of a Leisure and Tourism vocational course in the sixth form. This is run in conjunction with a neighbouring school, but the languages element of the course is taught by the languages department in the college.

Leadership and management of ML

The leadership and management of ML are good.

- There is a clear rationale for languages development in the school, and significant changes at Key Stage 3 have been well managed.
- The languages team now works cohesively, and is well led by the head of languages.
- Senior leaders are aware that languages need further promotion within the wider school community. The current drive to attract more pupils to Key Stage 4 languages has the potential to reverse current trends of low numbers opting for the subject.
- The head of languages is exploring alternatives to GCSE accreditation and eventual expansion post-16 within the context of the school's business and enterprise specialism.
- Resources are well managed: every classroom has IWB equipment and appropriate new paper-based resources have been recently purchased.
- There is scope for the department to further improve pupils' motivation by closer linkage to the school's rewards systems.
- The deployment of teaching assistants to support lower-attaining pupils in languages is in need of review.
- Review and improvement planning processes are well developed, and there is a clear vision for future development of languages in the school.

ML Benchmarks at Key Stage 4

- The school is well below the 50% target for languages take-up at Key Stage 4 but good, new structures in place at Key Stage 3 have the potential to bring about rapid improvement.
- School leaders and managers have a clear focus on raising achievement at Key Stage 3 and are introducing Year 9 accreditation to support this process.

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

Pupils' development of reading skills is satisfactory.

- Pupils' reading skills are currently developed mainly through textbooks. However, the rapidly expanding use of information and communication technology has the potential to widen opportunities for stimulating, topical reading.
- Some groups of pupils talked with enthusiasm of their classroom use of laptops, where they are able to develop their reading and writing skills independently, leading to good creative outcomes.
- In lessons observed, there were some good examples of pupils reading aloud from the IWB, developing reading and speaking skills.
- The department has good plans to develop reading skills further through the school's virtual learning platform.
- Appropriate emphasis is placed in lessons on the use of dictionaries and reference sources, in order to give pupils more independence in their reading. Classroom displays also provide helpful prompts.

Inclusion

Inclusion is satisfactory overall, with some good features.

- All pupils have the opportunity to study two languages in Key Stage 3, choosing their preferred option at the end of Year 7.
- Pupils have good opportunities to develop their home and heritage languages, and there are plans to extend this work further.
- Whilst pupils with learning difficulties have access to languages, younger pupils are sometimes taken out of languages lessons for withdrawal language support. This makes it very difficult for them to catch up in these early stages of foreign language learning.
- The department is considering how better use of teaching assistants might be made to support lower-attaining pupils and those with learning difficulties.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising the numbers of pupils continuing with their languages beyond Year 9
- developing a greater consistency of approach across the department for giving feedback to pupils, through: the use of formative comments and regular curriculum target-setting; accurate marking and summative assessment; and better use of the rewards system
- improving support for lower-attaining pupils in Key Stage 3.

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

Anne Feltham
Her Majesty's Inspector