

Alexandra House T 08456 404040
33 Kingsway F 020 7421 6855
London enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
WC2B 6SE www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr S Timbrell
Headteacher
Coventry Blue Coat C of E School and Music College
Terry Road
Coventry
CV1 2BA

Dear Mr Timbrell

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 10-11 December 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 schools 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 school 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.

The overall effectiveness of music is good with outstanding features. High standards are achieved (particularly at GCSE and in singing) and teaching is outstanding. Music plays an extremely important part in school life in terms of enhancing Christian ethos and worship, setting high expectations for the quality of what students can achieve and in improving self-esteem of these students. Alongside these strengths, there are some musical traditions that are under-represented and some groups of students who do not benefit sufficiently from specialist college status, which is now in its third year.

Achievement and Standards

Achievement and standards are good with outstanding features.

- Students join the school with above average musical attainment. They make good progress in Key Stage 3 to reach standards that are well above average. Students taking GCSE music achieve exceptionally high standards; this represents good progress in relation to their abilities. Standards are above average at A Level; students make good progress overall with the best progress made in Music Technology.
- Whilst the numbers of students opting for music in Key Stages 4 and in the sixth form are above the national average, the school has not met the targets set for participation in examination courses when it became a specialist music college.
- Standards of singing are outstanding. The four-part Blue Coat Choir is of exceptional quality, performing in venues around the country and on national radio and television. This excellence has been sustained for many years.
- An above average number of students receive specialist instrumental tuition in and out of school and they make good progress. Nevertheless the range of instrumental lessons and other ensemble opportunities is not as wide, and the numbers of students that participate in additional activities (including those with learning difficulties or disabilities) is not as great as proposed in the specialist college plan.

Quality of teaching and learning

The overall quality of teaching and learning is outstanding.

- Teaching is consistently good throughout the department and there are examples of exemplary practice.
- Teachers have good and in some cases outstanding personal musical skills. They model and lead musical activities confidently which encourages students to perform and take creative risks. For example, singing is strong because it is modelled expertly.
- Lessons are well-planned; clear learning objectives emphasise the musical skills that students are expected to develop. There is a constant emphasis on practical music-making and students' aural development.
- Teachers know their students well. In all lessons, the needs of the more able and those who find learning more difficult are considered and good support provided. Teachers assess thoroughly and this helps them to plan ahead for future teaching and learning.
- In the sixth form, students benefit from their teachers' good subject knowledge and thorough understanding of the exam courses. There are occasions when students could be encouraged to participate more in discussions when analysing set works and when their performing and composing work is being appraised.

Quality of the music curriculum and extra-curricular provision

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

- In Key Stage 3, all classes have three hours of music every fortnight which reflects the specialist status of music and enables additional singing work.
- GCSE and A Level courses are provided both during the normal school day and after school. Whilst more able students are accelerated to take examinations early, allowing them to study for additional qualifications, the school has not expanded the range of courses to include vocational options. This means that the needs or interests of some students are not met or recognised through accredited courses.
- There are outline schemes of work for Key Stages 3 and 4 that are used across the department. Teachers have the flexibility to plan their own medium and short term plans within these outlines, which they do creatively and thoroughly. There is, however, insufficient monitoring to assure a consistent quality of curriculum and assessment for all students.
- There are excellent opportunities for students to perform in ensembles, such as the orchestra, wind band, musical-dramatic productions, choirs and jazz group, which all perform to a good standard. All styles of music are respected by staff and students. Whilst there is a steel pans group, recently-formed Gospel Choir, occasional world music workshops and opportunities for rock bands to rehearse and perform, not enough is done to promote and support groups that perform in non-Western or non-traditional musical styles.

Leadership and management of music

The overall quality of leadership and management is good.

- There is a clear vision for music, good support to music staff and an expectation for the highest standards. Whilst the school's written self-evaluation for music is too descriptive and is not sufficiently evaluative, the department's action plan and professional discussions during the inspection showed that there is a good understanding about what is successful and what needs to be done to improve further – for example, giving more attention to ensuring that music benefits all groups of students equally.
- Accommodation for music is cramped and does not reflect the status of music in the school. The new theatre complex, due for completion next year, promises to improve things considerably. Governors and senior managers have done much to realise this provision.

Subject issues: Data collection and partnerships

- The school has an extremely positive partnership with the local authority Music Service. The instrumental teaching programme is very well managed. Instrumental teachers play an important part in the school's

success, including the direction of ensembles. Curriculum teachers from the school provide effective leadership within the local authority for curriculum work, particularly in Music Technology and Key Stage 3.

- Not enough use is made of data about students' participation in curriculum and extra-curricular activities, particularly in relation to the involvement of different groups of students. Attendance registers are not taken regularly for all ensembles, which means that students' participation cannot be monitored effectively.
- There are strong links with professional musicians, through visits and workshops, and the school works closely with the local Creative Partnerships programme.
- There are outstanding links with primary schools. Through specialist school status, one teacher provides music lessons for Year 5 and 6 classes from local primary schools. This work is successful because the expertise of the secondary music teacher is complemented by the primary class teachers' expertise and knowledge of their pupils. Teachers work together to plan and assess lessons that are rigorous and robust in their musical learning objectives, but which are also tailored to meet pupils' needs and abilities. This is exemplary practice.

Inclusion

- Students with learning difficulties are well-known to teachers and there is good consideration of their needs in all lesson plans. Teachers work effectively to ensure that everyone is able to participate and learn in classroom activities.
- There is a scholarship scheme to support talented students with the cost of instrumental tuition. Whilst an open remissions policy assists students whose circumstances may otherwise prevent participation, the range of regular tuition in school does not include a sufficient variety of musical styles and this means that some students do not benefit as fully as others.

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

- increasing the range of musical styles and numbers of participating students through additional regular instrumental and vocal tuition, ensemble performance opportunities, and accredited examination courses
- coordinating curriculum provision in Key Stage 3 to ensure that good practice is shared and that there is consistency of assessment for all classes
- monitoring student participation in additional instrumental tuition and participation in ensembles, and using this information to ensure that specialist college status benefits all groups of students equally.

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

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