

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 020 7421 6855
www.enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mrs Paula Taylor-Moore
Headteacher
Didcot Girls' School
Manor Crescent
Didcot
Oxfordshire
OX11 7AJ

Dear Mrs Taylor-Moore

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Learning Outside the Classroom (LOTC)

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 20 September 2007 to look at the way that learning outside the classroom contributes to your school's curriculum and to pupils' achievement and personal development.

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 are published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with the senior leadership team, several discussions with staff and pupils and scrutiny of relevant documentation.

The overall effectiveness of the contribution made by learning outside the classroom to the curriculum was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards, including personal development

- The majority of students join the school with average levels of attainment for their age. They make good progress during Key Stage 3 and achieve above average results in the national tests by the end of Year 9. Most pupils continue to make good progress and the proportion of students achieving five or more A* to C grades in the GCSE examinations has been consistently above average in recent years. However, provisional GCSE results for 2007 are lower than in previous years and we discussed in

detail how the school has acted swiftly to halt this dip. Sixth form students achieve well and attain consistently above average A-level pass rates.

- You have undertaken a careful review of assessment and tracking procedures to ensure that the progress of students is monitored by all departments in a rigorous and systematic way against targets set. Several staff and students commented that, albeit at an early stage, the new vertical tutoring structure is providing more time for regular academic mentoring.
- The specialist language college status is making a positive contribution to students' achievements and several departments, for example art and geography, are embracing the opportunities available wholeheartedly.
- Students' personal development and well-being are were outstanding; in discussions their attitudes and behaviour were impressive. They were able to discuss with confidence the wealth of innovative experiences on offer with a clear understanding of how these help them to achieve and grow as individuals. Such high quality discussion was a joy to listen to and a fitting testament to the school's excellent values and beliefs.
- Several students talked eloquently about how aspects of learning outside the classroom had influenced their lives for the better. One remarked, 'The history trip to Belgium affected me emotionally; my writing improved because I could empathise with how the soldiers felt in the trenches'. Several others recalled how they took responsibility for taking care of their passports and money on their world challenge visit to Croatia and commented with great pride, 'We now know how to look after ourselves when we go abroad'.
- Four students who organised the popular talent and fashion shows spoke about how the responsibility had given them great confidence and self-belief due to the life skills they developed.

Quality of teaching and learning within LOTC

- In discussion with staff from a wide range of departments, it is apparent that learning outside the classroom is integrated successfully into curriculum planning for all subjects and is reviewed regularly. Activities are chosen thoughtfully so that they enrich students' learning.
- Preparation materials, including letters to parents, make appropriate reference to learning objectives and staff are encouraged to make comments about responses from the students. Practical work makes learning meaningful. Examples include the visit to Oxford United FC as part of a mathematical project, and the popular history trip to Warwick castle.
- Without exception, students could link learning outside the classroom directly to topics and in many instances recalled what they had learnt in a mature and sophisticated manner. 'I can remember better because I can visualise the practical experience,' remarked a student. Several said, language trips gave them greater 'confidence in oral work' and others spoke movingly about the trust and teamwork they developed when confronted by Duke of Edinburgh challenges.

Quality of the contribution made by LOTC to the curriculum

- You and your staff have a fundamental belief that LOTC experiences are vital to extend the horizons and aspirations of the students and you capitalise expertly on what is available in the local community and beyond. Excellent examples of this are partnerships with local schools, colleges and universities, together with your extensive international links.
- There is a wealth of activities to enrich the students' spiritual and cultural development and every effort is made to give the students access to galleries, museums and theatres to deepen their artistic appreciation of art, dance, drama, literature and music.
- The range of clubs and opportunities for the pupils to learn outside of school hours is impressive. These are valued greatly by the students and serve their academic, artistic and sporting interests well. The chemistry and physics films produced and directed by the science club are excellent examples of how the students are challenged to try new approaches in their learning. I note that these are being disseminated further beyond school.

Leadership and management of LOTC

- Working closely with your senior leadership team and others, you have developed over time a thoughtful philosophy for learning to meet the needs of Didcot students. Your belief, that students need to have a variety of experiences which go beyond the confines of the examination system to become successful young women, is right for your school.
- The administration of learning outside the classroom is managed expertly by the coordinator and documentation is well organised.
- The school does not monitor and evaluate the impact of LOTC activities in a sufficiently systematic way.
- The school possesses a clear vision and commendable values which drive curriculum developments in a rigorous and refreshing way. You are determined not to be complacent, recognising the importance of robust evaluation to ensure the quality of education continues to improve for the students in your care.

Inclusion

- You lead a very inclusive school where the needs of all the students and their parents and carers are met in a caring, creative and consultative way.
- The students possess a very strong sense of identity and are very sensitive to equal opportunity issues. Their voice really matters; they feel listened to and, most importantly, their views make a difference for the better to their lives at school. However, there is scope for students to have better opportunities to contribute more formally to the school's evaluation of LOTC.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- monitoring and evaluating the impact of LOTC in a systematic and consistent way
- encouraging students to evaluate formally how LOTC contributes to their learning and achievement.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Mary Harlow
Her Majesty's Inspector