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Mr M Ryan
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Ryan

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

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and governors, during my visit with Alison Storey HMI on 15 October 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 staff, governors and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and brief visits to some lessons.

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

Achievement and standards, including personal development

- Students enter the school with a wide range of needs although, overall, attainment on entry is above average. They make good progress during their time in school, with particularly rapid progress in many subjects during Key Stage 4. Standards in GCSE examinations are significantly above the national average.
- Students' attitudes and behaviour are outstanding. They are excellent ambassadors for their school, of which they are proud. In discussion, they pointed out clearly, and using good examples, that learning outside the classroom contributes much to their academic learning, confidence, skills and

personal, spiritual and emotional development. In saying this so clearly, students uphold the clear philosophy the school has, based on its Catholic foundation, of developing the 'whole child', 'vibrant in faith and learning.'

- You, your staff and governors have a general sense, based on observation, that the school's LOTC activities are very worthwhile in raising achievement and standards. However, you are not able to demonstrate this, or sharply identify areas for improvement; what are generally excellent self-evaluation systems do not include the collation of staff and students' views of learning outside the classroom, data gathered about levels of participation in such activities by different groups or observations of the effectiveness of these activities.

Quality of teaching and learning within LOTC

- Students spoken with said that the quality of teaching and learning in activities outside the classroom is high. For example, Year 11 students considered that a residential visit to Germany was clearly related by staff to their history work in class and brought their history learning to life. One said, 'You see it in real life'. They clearly explained how this visit had deepened their learning, saying 'It gave us pictures in our mind'; or, about a visit to a concentration camp, 'It made me feel guilty about what we have.'
- Lessons briefly visited around the school indicated that students are consistently well-motivated by and responsive to the teaching they receive. The one lesson formally observed by HMI prepared Year 10 students well for a visit to the national portrait gallery the following day. The purposes of the visit were made plain in the lesson, including clear links to the art theme being studied in class. Students responded with interest, seeing the relevance of the visit to their learning.

Quality of the contribution made by LOTC to the curriculum

- The school provides many very successful and worthwhile activities for learning outside the classroom. These include a broad range of well-liked extra-curricular activities, with nearly half of students attending at least one. There are several very successful day and residential visits, which are thoroughly planned and closely and carefully linked to the overall curriculum. Students value all of these highly. However, the school underuses its rich immediate local environment, though there are a few good examples of effective use of this.
- Some examples of particularly good practice are the delivery of Christmas hampers in the locality which promotes good values and independence; the inclusion of activities such as canoeing and rock climbing in the general physical education (PE) curriculum; lunchtime reading groups and the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme which is very valuable for those students involved. A residential visit to Spain has helped improve the take-up of modern foreign languages at Key Stage 4.
- The school's approach to work-related learning and offering guidance to students about careers and future education, which relies heavily on learning

outside the classroom, is well-organised and effective. Most students go on to worthwhile and appropriate sixth form courses in other schools or colleges, with very few leaving the school not in education, employment or training.

- The school is currently thoughtfully developing its curriculum, especially in Key Stage 4, to ensure that the needs of all students are even better met. This includes improving the vocational offer for all students. The place of learning outside the classroom within these developments is clearly valued but is somewhat implicit. It is not yet explicitly stated how these learning opportunities will be fully integral to the revised curriculum, although you are committed to this.

Leadership and management of LOTC

- You and your senior team have a very clear commitment to LOTC as part of a fully rounded education. This is shown clearly in the school prospectus, displays around the school, and through the wide and growing range of LOTC opportunities. Staff have a clear understanding of the value the school places on LOTC and their commitment to this is tested in recruitment processes.
- LOTC is managed very well. Staff receive very good encouragement and practical support when developing LOTC activities. The head of PE contributes significantly in her role of supporting and checking risk assessments. The roles of senior staff and governors in assuring quality, educational value and health and safety compliance are clear and effective. Support staff provide reliable and very effective administrative assistance.
- Senior staff and governors say they find it hard to measure the impact of learning outside the classroom. This is an area needing improvement within the robust overall self-evaluation processes.

Inclusion

- The school has a palpably welcoming and inclusive Christian ethos. Students feel very well looked after and fully included in the life of the school.
- You operate a sensitive system for ensuring that LOTC does not become too expensive for families and that those whose circumstances make it difficult for them to contribute financially are, for the most part, included. Parents are supportive of the school and its approach to these opportunities for learning. However, students indicate that cost can occasionally preclude attendance at some of the activities.
- A number of activities taking place outside the classroom, especially some residential visits, have a limited number of places available, so some students cannot attend. This can preclude some students from having equal and fair access to very good experiences. Nevertheless, staff and students are clear that the school effectively ensures that any student who misses one event will have a high priority for others. This is not formally monitored, however.
- There is scope to improve the impact and benefit of extra-curricular activities further still, by increased targeting of particular students, or groups of students, to certain activities where those groups may be under-represented

and from which they might benefit. For example, boys are under-represented in some musical activities. Fuller analysis of data about attendance at extra-curricular activities could support this process. Younger students, in particular, would like to see more musical and sporting activities available to them.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included the need to:

- include systematic evaluation of the impact of LOTC, and its take-up by all groups of students, within the school's existing successful self-evaluation processes
- increase the use of the school's local environment to promote and enrich learning.

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

Robin Hammerton
Her Majesty's Inspector