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Mr J Elms
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Dear Mr Elms

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 30-31 October 2007 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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are good.

- Standards are above national averages at both key stages. In French, standards at GCSE are well above average and have shown a steady trend of improvement over the last five years. Whilst standards in German have also improved they are just below average, having declined from the above average level in 2005. Standards in Spanish

are high although only relatively small numbers of students have opted for Spanish as the school develops it as its third modern language.

- Teacher-assessed standards at the end of Year 9 in the first modern language are above average and have improved steadily during the last three years. The percentage of pupils achieving Level 6 and above has also increased. Whilst girls continue to achieve higher standards than boys, the gap is narrowing, especially at Key Stage 3.
- Standards in the sixth form are broadly average although variable. French results are stronger than those in German, although there are disappointingly few students particularly at A2.
- Pupils' overall attainment on entry to the school is broadly average and they make steady progress in modern languages. At GCSE they achieve significantly higher standards in French and Spanish than in their other subjects although, in 2006, they did less well in German.
- In 2007 most pupils met their targets or were very close to them. Current students are making good progress in listening, reading and particularly writing where their work is often accurate. Standards in speaking are less good. Although students are encouraged to speak, and take risks, they lack confidence and standards of pronunciation and fluency are below expectations.

Quality of teaching and learning in ML

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Students make good progress in most lessons because of their good response to a range of activities and lively, well-planned teaching.
- However, they react too often in English to questions and comments in French or German as a result of teachers' over-use of English in some lessons. Teachers have well-developed skills in the languages they teach but sometimes use these skills less effectively than they might for students to imitate.
- Teaching assistants (TAs) provide good support to pupils with learning difficulties. When TAs are not available, teachers support individual learners but appropriate tasks are not always available to meet the needs of students who need to learn at a different pace.
- In particular, planned extension tasks are often not provided for the most able students.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding.

- The school has greatly developed the breadth of the ML curriculum in recent years.
- German has been a highly prized part of the curriculum to support the partnership of the town with Alsfeld. French and German were taught alternately for many years as the principal ML but both have now been

developed as joint first ML. All students have the opportunity to study the other principal language from Year 8.

- In the second half of Year 9 all students have a taster course in Spanish and are then offered a beginners course in Year 10, leading to GCSE. Spanish has developed from twilight courses and now has a place on the timetable
- Students speak highly of the school's efforts to accommodate their choices of ML from Year 10 onwards.
- Mandarin and Russian are now being offered after school and a partnership has been established with a school in China and as well as the existing exchange arrangements with schools in France and Germany. The school has a new partnership with a school in Kenya as it seeks to become an International School.
- In addition to the strong programme of visits and exchanges, Post-16 pupils have undertaken work experience abroad.
- There is a regular languages day in school and the department has given support to primary schools in developing their ML curriculum.
- Students say they enjoy their ML Lessons and they are clear in their appreciation of the purpose of language learning in developing them as citizens of the wider world. As one student put it, '[To learn a language well] you have to open your mind.'
- The department has good resources in information and communication technology (ICT) including a range of appropriate software. Students use ICT productively in school to produce extended writing, posters and presentations and they are able to access 'Linguascope' at home.

Leadership and management of ML

Leadership and management are outstanding.

- The Head of ML, with high quality support from the school leadership, has led the development of ML in the school from a low base with vision and energy. This has led to improvement in standards, progress and provision.
- The school leadership has supported the strengthening of the ML curriculum by encouraging new courses and allowing them to run with small groups in the early stages. In turn, ML teachers teach twilight sessions in new and established languages.
- As a result ML is a popular and successful part of the curriculum. The Head of ML has earned the trust and loyalty of colleagues in developing a strong team ethos. She demonstrates the ambition and enthusiasm to build on the success the department has achieved.
- Through monitoring and evaluation she recognises the strengths of the provision and areas for further development and has planned effectively for the next steps. This clearly demonstrates the capacity for yet further improvement.

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

- The school has not formally established benchmarks for language take-up at Key Stage 4. In the most recent year 46% of students have chosen to study a language in Year 10.

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

This is satisfactory.

- Reading is not fully embedded as a means of developing language skills.
- Students achieve good results in reading at GCSE.
- In most lessons reading was seen, students were able to understand text and to read to extract specific information.
- However, much of the feedback from this reading was in English, when the material to respond in French or German was easily accessible.
- Students are not confident when reading aloud and lack fluency and good accents.
- Some pupils do read for enjoyment, although the school library does not have a selection of books in ML.

Inclusion

Inclusion is good.

- The ML department actively encourages all pupils to study a language and provides good support to individuals to achieve well. Twilight sessions in Mandarin and Russian are open to all.
- Choices for Key Stage 4 are not based on traditional 'blocks' but on students' needs. It has been made possible for students at Key Stage 4 to study three languages and for one post-16 student to study three.
- If it is necessary, the languages teachers have regularly offered twilight sessions to make it possible for students to learn or improve language skills.
- In lessons teachers and TAs support individuals well to enable them to achieve according to their ability. However, tasks targeted at pupils' individual abilities are not always available.
- Students appreciate the individual support they receive from their teachers and their commitment to extra-curricular activities in ML.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- developing students' use of speaking skills in French, German and Spanish as a vehicle for learning
- providing planned tasks matched to the individual abilities of students.
- further embedding reading to support progress in other language skills.

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

Peter McKenzie
Additional Inspector