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28 January 2008

Mr S White
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Dear Mr White

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and for the help of your staff and pupils, during my visit on 21-22 January 2008 to look at work in modern languages.

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 included: interviews with staff and learners, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of learners' work, and observation of seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of modern languages was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are good.

- A level pass rates are very high in all three languages. The percentage of students achieving the highest grades is consistently above the national average.
- The number of pupils entered for a modern language at GCSE is well above average. Results in French have been falling in recent years,

partly because of staffing difficulties, and are now below average. In German the results fluctuate from below to above average. Spanish results are consistently above average.

- Teacher assessment at the end of Key Stage 3 indicates that standards are above average. Many more girls than boys achieve the highest levels.
- By the end of each key stage pupils can write about themselves fairly accurately using an appropriate range of vocabulary and tenses.
- Pupils can talk about themselves with satisfactory pronunciation using well rehearsed sentences. They lack confidence when listening to questions spoken at the speed of a native speaker and when the context has not been made clear to them.
- Although they have a fair knowledge of the relationship between spellings and pronunciation they do not apply it when they see the written word.
- Pupils' personal development is good: they enjoy the subject, behave impeccably in class, understand why it is important to learn a language, work well independently, and respect pupils from other countries and cultures.

Quality of teaching and learning in modern languages

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Lessons are well planned. Learning objectives are clear, precise and suitable, and in most lessons are supported by some well chosen activities.
- Lessons have a good structure. They build effectively on pupils' prior learning and progressively increase their knowledge and skills.
- Most lessons are conducted at a brisk pace and contain a variety of activities which interest and challenge the pupils.
- Relationships are very good. Teachers manage pupils' behaviour effectively. In the best lessons pupils enjoy the teachers' enthusiasm and good humour.
- The department uses a thorough and carefully designed assessment system to set targets for pupils and to check on their progress. As a result, staff can identify underachievement at an early stage and plan to overcome it.
- A minority of lessons, though satisfactory overall, lack pace and activities to enthuse the pupils.
- Pupils are not exposed sufficiently to the spoken language.
- In classes where pupils are not so responsive, teachers do not have reliable methods for assessing how well they are following the lesson.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The curriculum content is relevant to the GCSE and prepares pupils thoroughly for most parts of the examination.
- The numbers opting for the subject in Key Stage 4 are high. A good proportion studies two languages. This is because of good teaching in Key Stage 3, the strongly supportive organisation of the option system, staff's relentless effort to impress on pupils the importance of languages, and the department's high profile throughout the school. Nonetheless, considerably more boys than girls drop the subject at the end of Year 9.
- The curriculum is enhanced by a very good range of extracurricular activities, including visits abroad, and interesting events and initiatives beyond the classroom.
- The scheme of work gives considerable detail of what is to be assessed and how. It does not, however, provide enough support for teachers. For example, it does not suggest teaching approaches, ideas for using information and communication technology (ICT), or ways of developing pupils' creativity or cultural awareness.
- As a consequence of staff's close collaboration with partner primary schools in teaching French, pupils are able to make more rapid progress when they start in Year 7.

Leadership and management of modern languages

Leadership and management are good.

- Managers' very accurate knowledge of the subject's strengths and weaknesses is due to their comprehensive approach to monitoring the work of the department and evaluating its effectiveness.
- A sound action plan sets out a clear agenda for raising standards, based on the subject leader's analysis of key data. It does not, however, deal with boys' underachievement, although managers are aware that this is a concern.
- The department is strongly supported by senior leaders; this is reflected in the good level of resources, such as regular access to an ICT suite and the services of foreign language assistants, and in the opportunities for the subject to be involved in whole-school initiatives.

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

The school has not set a benchmark, although it is currently assessing what would be a realistic target for increasing take-up.

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

This is good.

- GCSE scores in reading are high. Pupils are prepared well for this part of the examination.
- Pupils have good strategies for understanding passages which contain unfamiliar language.
- Reading passages are used to good effect as a teaching tool, for example to develop pupils' vocabulary or their ability to use connectives.
- Pupils understand the gist of passages but sometimes do not understand the detail; they do not know the meaning of key words, such as basic prepositions.
- Teachers seldom use ICT to introduce pupils to authentic texts, or use reading passages for developing pupils' intercultural understanding.

Inclusion

- All pupils learn two modern languages in Key Stage 3.
- Bilingual pupils are provided with opportunities to celebrate their home language in school; some take examinations in their home language.
- Most groups of learners make good progress, though not enough boys attain the highest standards in Key Stage 3 or continue to study a language in Key Stage 4.
- Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve well because of teachers' high expectations and the regular monitoring of their progress.
- The subject leader analyses the performance of boys and girls but has not yet had the data to inform an analysis of the progress made by vulnerable groups.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included to:

- improve GCSE results in French and German
- help boys to reach higher standards in Key Stage 3 and encourage more to learn a language in Key Stage 4
- develop pupils' ability to understand the spoken language better and to answer questions more confidently.

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

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and local learning and skills council. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Derek Neil
Her Majesty's Inspector