

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

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



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Mrs A Merrills
Headteacher
Sir Jonathan North Community College
Knighton Lane East
Leicester
LE2 6FU

Dear Mrs Merrills

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages and art and design

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and those of your staff and students, during our visit on 19-20 May 2008 to look at work in modern languages (ML) and art and design.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subjects, the visit had a particular focus in ML 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. In art and design the focus was on the impact of assessment on learner's individual progress and creativity.

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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of ten lessons: five in ML and five in art and design.

Modern Languages

The overall effectiveness of ML was judged to be good with outstanding features.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is very good; standards are well above average. They are particularly good in Spanish despite the late start.

- In 2007 students achieved results which were significantly above average both at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. Results have risen steadily over a number of years.
- Overall, in lessons observed students made very good, often excellent progress and no groups showed less achievement than others. Lessons are planned very well to ensure that students make very good progress and achieve the maximum in the time they have.
- Students are quite confident to speak and their pronunciation is good. This is due to the excellent role models provided by all teaching staff observed. One good example of speaking creatively was the play acting in Year 9 Spanish where students acted out a scene in a doctor's surgery.
- Students write quite long passages from early on and by Year 11 many can produce accurate written work which communicates very well and is creative and humorous on occasions. Low ability students produce good work of quite a high standard.
- Students are mostly able to understand what they are set to read and read aloud reasonably accurately. They say that they re-use language they have read in speaking tasks, for example by adapting a dialogue.
- They are learning to use tenses well in both speaking and writing which was demonstrated well in a Year 10 lesson where the future and conditional tenses were used.
- Students are exceptionally well-behaved, remain very consistently on task and alert to the lesson. They collaborate well and help each other in pair and group work. Most present their written work well.
- The large majority of students enjoy learning languages. Key Stage 3 students are extremely enthusiastic and describe their lessons glowingly. Key Stage 4 are a little less enthusiastic and feel that they become very exam led and consequently less interesting.
- They are all very clear about the usefulness of learning languages and how it can improve their economic well-being.
- Although language learning contributes very well to students' personal development, students' knowledge of the cultural aspects of the target language countries and communities is not as strong as it could be.

Quality of teaching and learning in ML

Overall, the quality of teaching and learning is outstanding.

- Teachers' use of the target languages to teach in is outstanding. Students respond well to this and benefit from it. Students themselves say that it helps them to make progress.

- Planning is outstanding; it is well thought through so that students are drawn through a logical chain of activities to reach the objectives set. Generally, the activities are interesting and relevant to the age group and include a very good mixture of class, individual, pair and group work.
- There was excellent pace and challenge in all lessons observed, yet all allowed for different abilities to achieve well and feel a sense of accomplishment.
- When new language is introduced, teachers ensure that it is practised intensively and that students know how to pronounce it correctly. All teachers are vigilant about this.
- Use of the electronic whiteboard to engage students and enhance their learning is excellent.
- Very regular, continuous assessment is a very good feature of lessons which enables both teachers and students to know how well they are doing in relation to the objectives; this often includes self and peer assessment.
- Regular assessment and setting level targets in students' records of assessment and on self assessment sheets helps students to improve and to become reflective learners. Exercise books are marked regularly with praise given; some provide helpful comments for students to make immediate improvements in their work.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- French is the main language and high ability students take Spanish from Year 8. Most of these students continue to take it as well as French in Key Stage 4.
- There is a good allocation of time to languages in both key stages although it is not quite as good for those who take Spanish in Years 8 and 9 as they only have one hour a week. Despite this they achieve very well.
- Schemes of work are very detailed in both key stages and meet well the needs of learners. Work adapted for less able students helps them to reach higher standards than they might otherwise.
- Students say they enjoy using information and communications technology (ICT) regularly in Key Stage 3 but less regularly in Key Stage 4 where they say they do not use it to draft and redraft their writing for accuracy.
- There is alternative accreditation to GCSE through the BTEC route.
- Currently, the pathways for languages in Key Stage 4 are aimed at students who will achieve National Curriculum level 5 and above and so take-up for languages is amongst the higher and middle ability students.
- The trips to France are very much appreciated by students who go on them and they are well subscribed. Study support is provided for Year

11 students after school. However, there are no out of school experiences for Spanish and this year there are no clubs for students who might benefit, for example, because they do not go abroad. The school is aware that this is something to tackle.

- The school facilitates students taking a GCSE in a home or heritage language which several students do each year.

Leadership and management of ML

Leadership and management are good with outstanding features.

- There is very dedicated subject leadership and management which have ensured that achievement and standards have steadily risen over the last few years. The department works hard to ensure that teaching and learning are of a consistently high quality in order to achieve high standards.
- There is a high number of part-time staff which has been retained because of their quality; this is managed very effectively so that there has been no adverse impact on pupil outcomes. Senior leadership has been very supportive both of this and language learning generally. An example of this is the more recent accommodation of a second language completely within curriculum time.
- Analysis of subject data including regular assessment and examination results is very thorough and helps to inform teaching and learning and identify which skills may need extra attention.
- The departmental strategic plan is manageable and well- focussed on improvement. Self-evaluation is mostly accurate.
- Students' views of languages are sought regularly to inform departmental practice.
- The subject leader encourages innovation and the department is involved with a number of projects to develop good practice with other city schools, including working with some feeder primary schools and a speaking project with the National Languages Strategy Strategic Learning Network.
- As yet, the school feels that too few feeder primary schools teach a language systematically for it to adapt its work for Year 7, but it is aware of the need for this and to plan for transition before long.

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

- Two thirds of students take a language in Key Stage 4 which is significantly above the national average; 23 students are taking both French and Spanish in Year 11 in 2007/08.
- A number of students who do not take Spanish say they would like to do so.

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

This is satisfactory with some good elements.

- There is a good range of reading resources beyond the course books including authentic and 'home-made' resources. There are sets of 'easy reading' novels which Key Stage 4 students dip into from time to time and enjoy.
- Students are set reading tasks on a regular basis. The electronic whiteboard is used to underpin understanding of the written word well.
- Small amounts of reading were integrated into most lessons observed or set for homework. For example, in one lesson text was used to improve students' understanding of the future and conditional tenses. In another, a homework reading task linked well to the lesson, although it did not extend students' reading skills sufficiently.
- In a third lesson, reading tasks were constrained by the GCSE examination reading paper and an opportunity was missed to develop students' reading strategies more fully. The teacher was aware that further opportunities to develop reading strategies would be needed.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving all students' cultural development through ensuring lessons and extra curricular activity embrace it consistently
- improving the way in which students' reading strategies are developed and increase students' use of ICT in Key Stage 4
- ensuring more lower attaining students are encouraged to take up a language in Key Stage 4.

Art and design

The overall effectiveness of art and design was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are good.

- From below average starting points overall, students make good progress during the Key Stage 3 course. By the end of Year 9 standards are average overall. Students who start in Year 7 with good subject skills build on their experience achieving above average standards. Their ability to handle a range of art media confidently and creatively is evident in their sketchbook studies of 'still life'.
- An above average proportion of girls pursue the subject to examination level. Whilst GCSE results have fluctuated over recent years results in 2007 were in line with the high proportion of girls nationally who

achieve an A*-C grade but below at A* level. However, the quality and range of their research is a consistent strength.

- Students currently achieve well across a wider range of accredited courses including the Arts Council Arts Award. At GCSE students' highest standards are often associated with projects where the girls have expressed feelings and emotions skilfully in response to provocative themes such as 'barriers' or where their use of digital media has added fresh vitality to ideas that are becoming laboured.
- In all years students show satisfactory understanding of the work of artists, craftworkers and designers and how it connects to their own work. However, their critical thinking is not always explicit in their annotations or evaluations of their own work or the work of other artists. Some students are beginning to exploit ICT to communicate the purpose, meaning or impact of their work more clearly.
- The subject makes a good contribution to students' personal development. The Year 11 survey revealed that a very high proportion of girls were pleased with their choice of examination course. Students are attentive, observant and conscientious. Many continue to work independently in the art studios in between lessons. Whilst some students show little curiosity by asking questions or sharing views others openly express their inquisitiveness and enjoyment. Students co-operate well in group activities such as the Year 8 animation project in which confident leaders quickly emerge.

Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching and learning in art and design are good.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge, make effective use of continuing professional development and deploy support staff strategically to extend their impact on students' learning. All of these features are evident in the teaching of digital media which promotes efficient use of resources and high quality student achievements.
- In all lessons observed different teachers made objectives clear to students by sharing examples. These range from examples prepared or demonstrated by teachers through to relevant examples of work by other artists or students. The strong presence of high quality work displayed in the art studios and across the school site adds to a strong and clear message that expectations are high.
- Staff are committed to helping students with different abilities to succeed in lessons and through focused projects. Strategies include differentiated materials used to support a partially sighted student through to motivational projects that enable disengaged students to sustain interest and consolidate relationships across an unbroken block of time as part of the 'INCA' inclusion initiative. However, lesson and medium term plans do not always show how knowledge about individual students is used to personalise learning for all.
- Whilst teacher talk sometimes dominates, time is generally managed well and intervention used strategically by teachers to ensure that the

pace of learning remains brisk. The long projects are sensibly interspersed with skills teaching that enable students to return to familiar work with renewed enthusiasm. However, students are rarely taught how to revisit previous experiences in the way that many artists progress a series of work.

- Students value the guidance, enthusiasm and good role modelling of subject staff. Good relationships are established. Staff collaborate well with other subject specialists whilst promoting students' progress in art, craft and design. For example, the 'Maths for Life' initiative and 'Art Lab' glass project with science.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum in art and design is good with outstanding features.

- Curriculum liaison with primary schools in the subject includes stimulating projects that enable students to apply and develop new skills. Large canvases supported by confident experimentation exhibited in the school show that a high level of challenge is set and met. However, curriculum continuity across Years 6 and 7 is not yet sufficiently embedded to establish students baseline in the subject.
- In Key Stage 3 a strength of the curriculum is the integration of information and communications technology (ICT). Progression in the use of ICT is clearly planned alongside use of more traditional 2D media. Students are introduced to 3D media including ceramics but skills are revisited less systematically impacting on their later preference for 2D at examination level. Nevertheless, there is a consistent balance between fine art and design.
- In Key Stage 4 students revisit familiar themes in greater depth, inspired by the natural and built environment, personal identity including multiculturalism. However, themes that tap into their intellectual and emotional development deepen the meaning of students' work and drive their determination to express individual ideas, observations or feelings. Students connect their own work to that of other artists, craftworkers and designers more independently.
- In both key stages students are given opportunities to visit art galleries and museums, progressing from local visits to regional and national galleries. Whilst the impact is not always explicit in students' work discussions with girls in different year groups revealed that it developed an interest they would develop whether pursuing an examination or career related to the subject or not. However, some visits clearly build on students' experiences such as that planned to Tate Liverpool for the Gustav Klimt exhibition, an artist already encountered through the Year 9 identity project.
- An outstanding feature of the curriculum is the different pathways developed for students with different interests and intentions. The Arts Award is popular with students. The GCSE taken by most students is complemented by BTEC and NCFE Digital Arts qualifications. The department is also taking a leading role in the introduction of the

Creative and Media Diploma in 2009. The active community dimension of the school and programme of artists in residence also enable students to develop clear insights into the value of the subject as a career, as recreation or an opportunity to develop skills and creativity of relevance to other subjects.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of art and design are good.

- There is a clear and effective structure of roles and responsibilities that ensure that the subject supports and is supported by leadership and management of the faculty and specialism as a visual arts college. The direction of the subject is well-informed by the changing educational context and growth of creative industries connected to digital technology. Staff are consciously supported in developing and applying their strengths, based on accurate self-evaluation which as an arts faculty has been highly successful in the Arts Council 'Artsmark' Award as a basis for self-evaluation leading to continuous improvement.
- The subject mission statement is clear, concise and considered. However, subject documentation does not always reflect the quality and coherence of thinking that underpins the judicious decisions made about the approaches taken to course development and design.
- Whilst standards have fluctuated the determination to create opportunities that enable different students to succeed has remained focused. Evidence ranges from cross-curricular activities to help students improve their mathematical understanding through art related approaches through to initiatives centred on students' personal development and well-being. The effectiveness is particularly well tracked through the 'INCA' initiative where the objectives for individual students are explicit from the start and their progress tracked clearly. This provides a model for more personalised learning from Year 7.
- Productive partnerships exist with other educational settings in the area including schools, further and higher education. The 'Roots' exhibition held annually and publicly in the centre of the city is an example of an initiative led by the school that celebrates and promotes creative achievements. During the visit a joint lesson with the neighbouring boys' school was observed in which students from each school gained from team teaching.

The quality of assessment and its impact on students' progress and creativity

This is satisfactory.

- Individual discussions between teachers and students contribute convincingly to assessment for learning because they focus well on progress made in relation to lesson objectives. However, they do not focus on students' creative development often enough.

- Students' work is graded frequently. Whilst this informs students, their other teachers and parents it is not often supported by marking that clearly records what students could do to develop their strengths or resolve any problems.
- Group evaluation is integral to many lessons. Whilst those observed tended to focus on re-capping what had been done rather than how well it had been achieved discussions are valued by the students.
- Drawing is regularly assessed and progress monitored. However, too little is known about students' wider achievements on entry in order to track their progress or revisit prior experience in a structured way.
- Targets within projects are clearly identified. Long term targets across different projects or subjects are not an explicit part of assessment practice but students interviewed were nevertheless aware of strengths and weaknesses that recurred.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- promoting personalised learning early on by building on knowledge of students' prior experiences and achievements and increasing opportunities for students to respond expressively to themes
- developing students' critical skills through challenging questioning and differentiated prompts to aid students' thinking, speaking and writing when evaluating their own work and that of others
- structuring assessment tasks to evaluate students' progress across a range of skills, knowledge and understanding including their personal development.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop ML and art and design 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

Pam Haezewindt
Her Majesty's Inspector