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Mrs G Freear  
Headteacher  
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College  
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Dear Mrs Freear

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 21-22 January 2008 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.

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 six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML was judged to be good.

Context

The Convent of Jesus and Mary was designated a specialist language college in the early years of the initiative. Following a recent period of staffing difficulties, which hindered development, the new languages team is now building well on existing strengths. It is beginning to tackle very effectively identified weaknesses in students' motivation.

The languages team are fully involved in local initiatives at both Key Stages 2 and 3, working with other schools in the Borough. Curriculum links with other subjects, such as business and information and communication technology, are strong and the languages team has been instrumental in training other colleagues in the use of the interactive whiteboard (IWB).

### Achievement and standards

Achievement is good and standards are broadly in line with national averages.

- Although GCSE students in 2007 did not meet targets in French and Spanish, targets were exceeded in Italian. Current Year 11 students have made good progress over the first four terms of their GCSE course.
- At Key Stage 3, the 2007 results show variation between languages, with weaker standards in French and Spanish than in Italian. Students are currently making good progress in all languages and standards are consistently rising. For example, pupils in a lower-attaining Year 8 Italian group, in their first year of learning the language, are already mostly working at level 3b.
- Students in all year groups speak with confidence, accuracy and enjoyment of the language. They participate readily in structured speaking activities, and often contribute spontaneously with classroom phrases.
- Their listening skills are good. They respond well to taped listening tasks, and respond actively to the challenge when teachers use the target language.
- Students write with accuracy and attention to detail. Key Stage 4 coursework demonstrates good extended and creative writing.
- Languages work supports students' personal development well in the area of literacy skills, as they compare different grammatical systems.
- Students also expand their cultural horizons through languages work, and speak highly of intensive opportunities to practise their languages with foreign native-speakers and through study days and trips.
- Older students who have been successful in language-learning would like to work with younger classes to support their learning, and act as role-models.

### Quality of teaching and learning in ML

The quality of teaching and learning is good overall, and was never less than satisfactory in the lessons observed.

- Teachers have high expectations and students rise to the challenge. The great majority of lessons are characterised by a sense of pace and excitement, where students feel relaxed and confident whilst caught up in working competitively and to tight deadlines.

- The interactive whiteboard (IWB) is used well by all teachers to present clear and motivating information and tasks for students. In the lessons observed students were not using the IWB themselves, but could describe activities where they had used it interactively.
- Several language teachers use the target language very skilfully to challenge students and get them talking. This is not entirely consistent across the team. The department is focusing on strategies for developing learners' speaking skills and there is some evidence of impact.
- Assessment at Key Stage 3 is a priority for the team. During a period of staffing difficulties, accurate assessment and feedback were neglected. Teachers are now using very good strategies with students to involve them in their own learning and assessment, and this is leading to rapid improvement.
- At Key Stage 4, working with a modular GCSE course has enabled staff and students to develop a good sense of progress, with clear targets set for improvement.
- Marking is detailed and focused in both key stages, and most teachers give very clear feedback on progress and set helpful curriculum targets.
- Increased differentiation has been a priority for the team, and lessons observed showed that teachers know their students well, and plan very carefully to ensure that they are appropriately supported and challenged.

### Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The college offers three main curriculum languages – French, Spanish and Italian – and also has good extra-curricular provision for students to develop their home and heritage languages. Bilingual students are encouraged to gain accreditation as early as possible.
- Currently all students study two languages in both Key Stages 3 and 4, and languages are also offered post-16.
- From September 2008, students will have a greater element of choice in languages studied in Key Stage 3. The rationale for these changes is to further improve motivation, and also to build on students' knowledge and understanding of languages from Key Stage 2.
- At Key Stage 4 students have opportunities for fast-track language courses, 'languages ladder' accreditation in Year 11 and applied accreditation in French.
- Whilst numbers in French and Spanish post-16 are very small, there are enrichment opportunities for students in other languages, such as German. Joint provision with a local boys' school is offered in both French and Spanish. The college is currently considering offering AS Italian in response to requests from current Year 11 students.

- Extra-curricular opportunities include breakfast clubs, languages visits, hosting foreign visitors and a Year 9 business and languages day. Students are very enthusiastic about these opportunities and would like more.

#### Leadership and management of ML

Leadership and management are good.

- The newly appointed overall head of languages is well supported by you, her line manager, and by the language college director, who is also a member of the teaching team. She works closely with two very effective heads of Spanish and Italian.
- Good efforts have been made to bring coherence across the language teaching teams and ensure an equality of status across all languages.
- This supportive and cohesive management structure is already having a high impact on establishing consistently good teaching and high quality learning.
- The subject management team is building on good experience of subject monitoring to ensure that new and less experienced team members are well supported.
- Foreign languages assistants are deployed effectively to give students valued opportunities to experience language and culture in new contexts.
- The subject management team has recognised that Key Stage 3 assessment has been inaccurate in previous years and has contributed to student disaffection. Staff are now achieving a more consistent approach to all areas of assessment and target-setting.
- Increasing motivation for languages is a high priority and recent efforts are now bearing fruit. Older students are experiencing greater success in their language learning and are ready to act as role models for their younger peers.

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

All students in this specialist language college study two languages to GCSE or an alternative accreditation in Key Stage 4.

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

This is satisfactory.

- Whilst students read well from the clear textual models provided on the IWB and in the college's up-to-date text books, there are few opportunities for wider reading.

- Some students seek out authentic, topical materials from the internet or read foreign language magazines on topics which interest them, but the majority of students do not take these opportunities.
- In some classes teachers link texts to speaking practice, highlighting specific phrases and encouraging students to read aloud. Elsewhere choral repetition of key phrases makes good links between the written and spoken words. However, this helpful work is not yet undertaken systematically.

## Inclusion

- Many students in this multilingual college have a knowledge of one or more home or heritage languages. The college encourages them to study to develop their skills, and to gain accreditation at the earliest opportunity. This is a strength of languages provision.
- The college's inclusive language policy ensures that all students study two languages in Key Stage 3 and carry on, in appropriate courses, with two to GCSE or equivalent. Good plans to offer greater choice will bring even greater inclusivity.
- Higher-attaining students have the opportunity to take a fast-track course.
- Whilst trips are offered, the college is aware that many students are unable to take up these opportunities. Good alternatives, such as in-school hosting of foreign visitors and equitable deployment of foreign language assistants, ensures that all students have access to appropriate language-learning opportunities.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- maintaining the current clear focus on the improvement of teaching and learning in the classroom, amidst the major structural changes planned for the coming year
- ensuring that Key Stage 3 assessment is more accurate and is used to secure increased motivation for learners
- as part of the drive to increase students' interest in languages, devising strategies to get enthusiastic older language-learners working with younger students.

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 and local learning and skills council. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Anne Feltham  
Her Majesty's Inspector