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Dear Mrs Kenney

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages and English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and pupils, during our visit on 18-19 February 2008 to look at work in modern languages (ML) and English.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subjects, 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. In English, it had a focus on independent learning.

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 pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of five lessons in ML and seven lessons in English.

Modern languages

The overall effectiveness of ML was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Standards are well above average. Pupils achieve well in relation to their starting points.

- Reading skills are well developed; pupils skim and scan texts effectively and use bilingual dictionaries efficiently to find and check meaning.
- Pupils have very positive attitudes towards learning languages. They listen attentively to the teacher and to each other.
- When pupils are given the opportunity to work informally, they increase in confidence and competence and are keen to participate in whole class oral work; they display a good degree of independence in manipulating the languages for themselves.
- Where pupils do not have this opportunity, they are reluctant to volunteer in whole class oral work and are too dependent upon written notes and prepared dialogues to complete speaking tasks fluently or respond to questioning spontaneously.
- There are relative weaknesses in the quality of pupils' writing and speaking.
- Where expectations are high pupils produce writing of a high quality using a wide variety of structures and a good range of language but this is not consistent across all classes.
- Pupils have a good understanding of how well they are doing and how to improve.
- They have an excellent understanding of the importance of learning languages.

Quality of teaching and learning in ML

Overall the quality of teaching and learning is good but it varies across the department from outstanding to satisfactory.

- Teachers' subject knowledge is excellent. Pupils benefit from excellent role models and clear explanations.
- The target languages are used effectively and extensively in lessons. Listening skills are well developed as a result and higher attaining pupils develop strategies for understanding some more complex or unfamiliar language through regularly interpreting for others.
- Teachers present new language clearly so that pupils rapidly understand and use it successfully themselves.
- Lessons are well planned with well sequenced activities so that pupils build effectively on previous learning.
- Text is used well to enable pupils to identify patterns and work out the meaning of new language.
- Very effective modelling and questioning enables pupils to identify, apply and explain patterns.

- In the most effective lessons the teachers' enthusiasm for the subject is contagious, learning is fun, pupils are keen to participate and they are not afraid of making mistakes.
- Pupils respond enthusiastically to problem solving activities but lower attaining pupils sometimes need more support to succeed than they are given.
- Opportunities are sometimes missed to develop reading and listening skills, for instance to predict what they are going to hear, identify key language they might hear or read, or share with others how they have arrived at an answer.
- Pupils are involved in evaluating their own and each others' work and setting their own targets for improvement. Teachers mark work regularly and give good guidance about how to improve.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- Pupils have the opportunity to take more than one language from Year 8 to the sixth form.
- Those pupils who are in lower sets, who have no prior knowledge of Urdu, are restricted to studying French, whereas others have the opportunity to choose between at least two out of Urdu, Spanish, German and French from Year 8 to sixth form.
- Extra curricular activities including language days, work experience and trips abroad and access to native speakers are excellent.
- Information communication technology is used effectively to support and extend learning.
- The sixth form curriculum is well thought out with the emphasis placed firmly on extending students' knowledge and range of language.

Leadership and management of ML

Leadership and management are good.

- There is strong support for ML from the headteacher and senior leadership team.
- Pupils' progress is monitored closely by both the head of department and the senior leadership team.
- There is rigorous analysis of assessment information, strengths and weaknesses are identified and effective action planned to raise standards. However, this is not clearly expressed in departmental planning documents.
- Liaison with primary feeder schools is at the early stage of development. The school is aware of the need to develop more effective links in order to ensure a smooth transition in ML.

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

This is excellent. Around half of pupils study at least one language in Key Stage 4.

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

This is good.

- Opportunities are frequently taken to link sounds and spelling.
- Text is used effectively to reinforce learning.
- Text is used effectively to enable students to identify, explain and apply patterns and as a result students have a good understanding of grammar.
- Text is used to good effect to enable pupils to identify patterns, to extend pupils' range of language and to develop reading skills.
- Pupils use bilingual dictionaries well and some take books from the library to read for pleasure.
- The Internet is used well to increase pupils' cultural understanding.

Inclusion

Inclusion is satisfactory.

- There is no difference in the attitudes or achievement between different groups.
- The withdrawal of a small number of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities for basic skills in Key Stage 3 slows their progress in French.
- The choice of languages is restricted for pupils in lower ability groups who have no prior knowledge of Urdu.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- increasing opportunities for pupils to use languages spontaneously and for real purposes and to learn from others
- improving the quality of teaching and learning across the department to that of the best
- reviewing the curriculum to eliminate inequalities for lower attaining pupils and those who have no prior knowledge of Urdu.

English

The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement & standards

Standards in English are above average and achievement is good.

- Care needs to be taken in interpreting historical data because: the school enters a significantly higher proportion of pupils in English at GCSE than seen nationally; the school has a flexible entry policy to the sixth form; and the school operates within a selective context.
- Standards in Year 9 tests in 2007 were broadly average. Pupils' progress was below that seen nationally but broadly satisfactory. Current progress is good. Pupils are on track to improve significantly their 2007 results, particularly at the higher levels.
- Standards at GCSE dipped in 2007 and were slightly below the national average for girls, particularly in English Literature at A* to C grades. Historically standards are higher and the average points score per entry is usually the equivalent to a C grade in both English Language and English Literature. All pupils gained a grade in English Language and almost all gained a grade in English Literature in 2007.
- Current achievement in lessons is good and pupils are on target to attain above average results in their English examinations.
- All students gained a pass at A level English and students did better in English than other subjects. Overall achievement at AS and A level, given students' starting points was satisfactory. Current progress is good.
- Standards observed in lessons were good in reading, writing and listening but weaker in speaking.
- The subject makes a very good contribution to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Pupils behave well and have good attitudes to the subject in lessons.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning of English is good.

- Teaching fosters good learning. This is because teaching across the department is carried out by specialist, experienced and able colleagues, confident in the subject and clearly well prepared. The department is now fully staffed.
- The analysis of data, the close monitoring of pupils' progress and early identification of underachievement with associated mentoring, have meant that the department has increased its expectations of what pupils can achieve. This is reflected in lessons in the consistent emphasis on achievement.
- Good oral presentations are a regular feature at GCSE with higher sets. However, they are less common with pupils in lower sets and at Key

Stage 3. Pupils' learning in English needs more speaking opportunities using formalised language. Some lessons observed did not make sufficiently effective use of plenaries and other means of reviewing learning.

- Good relationships with pupils, which underpin the good learning, are evident across the department. There is a very strong sense of partnership with older pupils and students.
- There is excellent summative marking of units of work. Formative marking, often focuses on structure, organisation and impact and it is unclear in all cases whether there is consistent, close formative marking of spelling.
- Pupils make good use of ICT. Pupils and parents can access their assessment profile on line.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is good.

- The curriculum provides good opportunities for pupils to progress and develop well in their English work. All pupils take Language and Literature courses at GCSE. Media studies is offered as an out-of-hours course. Post 16, the department provides a combined language and literature course and media studies at AS and A level. In addition, the department is operating a modular pilot GCSE course. There are good enrichment opportunities.
- Pupils read a broad range of intrinsically demanding texts and work is carefully structured and rigorous. There is a good balance of reading, writing, speaking and listening in lessons with older pupils. Younger pupils felt there was a lot of emphasis on revision and writing.
- A very significant strength in pupils' eyes is the fact that English is up-to-date, uses modern texts and welcomes change and new ideas. One pupil described as 'memorable' the Madonna song they devised recapping the themes of Macbeth. The work is at a depth which challenges higher attaining pupils.
- The school's specialism has made a very effective contribution in that additional funding has allowed this ten-form entry school to operate six sets for each half of the population.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management of English are good.

- The combination of excellent leadership by the head of department and strong management across the department has meant that the department has effectively raised the level of pupils' achievement. This has been achieved by: demanding targets; close tracking of pupils' progress; and greater accountability for that progress. There is clear capacity to improve the work of the department even further.
- Pupils praised the effective organisation of the department particularly with regard to coursework. The introduction of the coursework 'tracker

system' means that the department monitors the progress and submission of course work closely.

- The department's self-evaluation is good. There is a strong sense of teamwork and a professional reflective culture. Good use is made of data and there are clear priorities for development.

Independent learning in English

Independent learning in English is good.

- Year 11 pupils were very clear how the subject had supported their independence of thinking and personal response to literature. They are encouraged to formulate their own views as long as they can argue the case with evidence. Pupils understand that this is as a transferable skill to other subjects.
- The course work structure and homework allow for independent choice and pupils do have some say in which texts they read. Independent reading is encouraged but not consistently, although the library – an evident focal point for pupils – does play an important part in this.
- Pupils make effective use of ICT and this contributes well to independent learning.

Inclusion

Inclusion in English is good.

- Pupils with learning difficulties and or disabilities (LDD) make good progress against their targets because of the quality of provision in the lower sets. The fact that almost all pupils gain GCSE grades represents significant personal achievement.
- The department has given more focus to higher attaining pupils in Key Stage 3 and this is beginning to have a positive impact.
- The course provides good opportunities to reflect the school's diverse population. The progress of all pupils is tracked carefully and underachievement is now picked up early with subsequent mentoring.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- monitoring the impact of teaching on pupils' learning by more effective use of plenaries
- providing more opportunities for formal oral presentations at Key Stage 3.

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

Judith Tolley
Additional Inspector