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Mrs E Gilpin
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Gilpin

Ofsted survey inspection programme: History

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 31 March and 03 April 2008 to inspect work in history.

As well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on school visits to places of historical interest. Given the school's status as a humanities college, I broadened this focus to include history's links with the wider (out-of-school) community.

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.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: visits to classes, interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, and a review of a sample of students' work.

The overall quality of history was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Standards and the progress made by students in Key Stages 3 and 4 are outstanding. In the sixth form, standards and progress are good and are improving.

- In the 2007 examinations, standards in Key Stages 3 and 4 were well above average. In AS examinations, standards were just above average. Standards at A Level were below average. These patterns have been broadly consistent over recent years. However, recent

improvements in students' performance mean that standards observed are now at least good.

- The reason for this strong performance in Key Stages 3 and 4 is the teachers' excellent understanding of students' needs which have influenced the way they teach. A good example is the way the history department provides extra classes and reading sessions for Year 12 students and revision clinics for both Year 12 and 13 students.
- Students' personal development is outstanding. It was clear in the majority of classes I inspected that students are becoming increasingly confident in planning their work, handling evidence and making judgements. They are also developing increasing sensitivity towards the human condition; for example, in their study of the black people of the Americas.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is outstanding.

- Although there are a few exceptions, students are keen to learn. This was apparent in all the lessons I attended including the after-school GCSE revision session where the high aspirations of many students were clear.
- It was also clear in the sixth form. In one lesson I attended, students worked together very well to produce very clear analyses of the interrelation of the Nazis with German youth. The quality of some of the written work I saw also confirmed students' commitment.
- Teachers place considerable emphasis on encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning, something which is also echoed by students. Although still open to further development (something openly acknowledged by the history department), I saw many examples of students taking initiatives, especially in relation to coursework and homework, which are often of very high quality.
- Teachers are knowledgeable and very committed. They are keen for students to do well and most of them recognise this. The emphasis on students becoming more independent has led teachers to be innovative in the way they teach and in the resources they have developed and use successfully.
- Students have very clear targets and marking is thorough. For example, sixth formers interviewed were very clear on what they need to do to improve as a result of simple but helpful comments by teachers at the end of essays.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding.

- On paper, the curriculum is a fairly traditional selection of the National Curriculum and a selection of examination specifications for GCSE, AS

and A Level. However, the innovation comes in the interpretation of the selection; for instance, the option in the second half of Year 9 for students to study an aspect of personal history; innovations such as Year 7's 'murder mysteries' linked to Thomas a Becket; and the videoing of Year 12's drama sketches about life in Nazi Germany later shown to Year 11 to promote understanding.

- The department has already begun thinking about the possibilities arising from the revisions to the Key Stage 3 curriculum. Current plans are conservative to allow for a cautious phasing in of change at a time when the department is already launching a new A Level. However, as it also acknowledges, it needs to go further to exploit the new opportunities.

Leadership and management

The quality of leadership and management is outstanding.

- The history department is vibrant, enthusiastic and reflective. This is very largely down to the head of department who has established an excellent relationship with colleagues by developing a successful and effective collegiate approach to developing the subject.
- She holds the confidence of senior school managers and together they have an excellent understanding of the subject's strengths and weaknesses. In particular, she and her colleagues have raised standards in the sixth form.
- Particularly impressive is the way in which she and her history colleagues have extended history's influence throughout the school. Two good examples are the spread of history's revision methods across the school and the creation by history students of resources for a 'learning' website shared with five other schools.

Subject issue: History and the wider community

Good use is made by the history department to sites of historical interest. These extend from the very local, such as St Mary Redcliffe church, to visits further afield such as Ypres and Berlin. These link well with the curriculum while others, such as the all-year-group visit to Florence, extend it.

Building on its role as a humanities college, the department, through the newly appointed outreach coordinator, has organised various community activities. These have included bringing local people into school to provide evidence for students' use; providing history events for local people such as 'Bristol in the Blitz'; and other similar events, such as an exploration of the Bristol Record Office, and an evening on multicultural Bristol. There are also excellent links with local primary schools. This year the focus has been on geography, but next year it will be on history. The department has also been helping a neighbouring secondary school develop its history provision.

Inclusion

Not all aspects of inclusion were inspected. The focus on this occasion was the department's support for disaffected and underachieving students. In Key Stages 3 and 4, the department uses a monitoring and coaching system. This system, which results in a range of provision for needy students, was conceived and first used in the history department but is now school-wide. Other support procedures have already been mentioned in this letter, namely the provision of extra classes, reading sessions and revision clinics. The curriculum has also been skilfully used to help and encourage groups of students; for example, the department has helped contribute to the whole-school drive to promote a positive sense of belonging and reduce exclusions amongst black and other minority ethnic groups; the curriculum was adjusted to acknowledge the histories of these groups.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, were:

- sustaining the improvement in sixth form standards and achievement in history
- continuing the development of history students taking responsibility for their own learning.

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

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term and made available to the team for the next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Paul Armitage
Additional Inspector