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Mr S Tierney  
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Dear Mr Tierney

Ofsted survey inspection programme – history

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 28 and 29 February to look at work in history.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) and the development of students' literacy 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 learners, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of eight lessons or part lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are good.

- Learners enter the school with average levels of attainment, make good progress across Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 and reach consistently above-average standards in their GCSE examinations. Since 2005, no student entered for the examination has failed to attain a grade and in both 2005 and 2006, the percentage reaching grades A and A\* was above the national average. There were fewer students reaching the highest grades in 2007.
- Students of all levels of ability achieve well in Key Stage 3 and are acquiring historical skills at a good rate. Many express their views with

confidence and have a good background knowledge of the topics they are studying.

- In Key Stage 4, students' skills of analysis and evaluation of source material is developing well, and they have a perceptive understanding, for example, of important aspects of the Weimar Republic.
- There is a wide range of ability in the sixth form, but students achieve well and demonstrate good examination technique. This is because teachers work hard to ensure that all students benefit from the advanced study of history.
- Although only average numbers opt for further study at GCSE level, students enjoy history and talk confidently about the skills they need for examination success. They behave appropriately, have a high regard for their teachers and get on well with their classmates, using them as an effective resource when given the opportunity to do so.

### Quality of teaching and learning in history

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Teachers have a secure knowledge of their subject and produce well-founded resources to motivate and interest their students. They are fully aware of the value of ICT in the teaching and learning of history and the electronic whiteboard is used to maximum effect in lessons.
- Lesson preparation is very good, new learning is linked effectively to skills and knowledge from previous lessons, and most sessions begin with thought-provoking starter activities. Teachers have high expectations of what their students can achieve and generally ask questions which demand high levels of thought from their students.
- On occasions, teachers direct learning too much and students are therefore not required to take enough responsibility for their own learning. In these lessons, challenge, particularly for more able students, is not high enough and, as a result, they sometimes do not reach for the highest standards.
- The ongoing assessment of student performance in class is good and teachers have a keen awareness of when their students are finding things difficult. Regular testing of students' knowledge and understanding in Key Stage 3 ensures that any underachievement is identified and students sometimes move teaching sets as a result.
- The quality of marking is inconsistent across the school. It varies from detailed remarks on how students can improve their work to little more than a cursory comment.

### Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is good.

- The curriculum fully meets statutory requirements and comprises modules and topics which fascinate students and which also help to develop their historical skills.
- The department takes the proposed new Key Stage 3 curriculum very seriously and has introduced a thematic approach to much of the teaching in Years 7 to 9. In addition, homework is a significant element

of curriculum delivery and teachers have produced detailed homework books which emphasise, for example, the development of students' literacy skills and the evaluation of source material.

- Students make positive comments about how the history curriculum encourages them to identify the best ways in which they learn. They add that their teachers know how to amend both teaching methods and subject content to ensure that the curriculum meets their individual learning needs.
- Teachers demonstrate their commitment to inclusion by modifying the scheme of work to ensure that it is accessible to students of low ability and by organising summer schools to challenge learners identified as gifted and talented.
- There are not enough enrichment activities to ensure that students maintain their love of history outside the classroom. Visits to Helmsore and the opportunity two sixth form students had to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau are well received by learners, but many express the opinion that they would like more historical visits and in all years.

### Leadership and management of history

The leadership and management of history are good.

- The head of department leads the subject by example and is well supported by a committed team of teachers, all of whom have other whole-school responsibilities. Her extensive leadership qualities are demonstrated by her untypically wide and perceptive knowledge of the Key Stage 3 curriculum and its implications and by the consistently above-average standards reached by learners in the department.
- Departmental self-evaluation is accurate and is based on detailed analysis of performance data. However, evaluation is sometimes informal and there is not enough emphasis placed on the scrutiny of students' working and marking.
- There is a detailed departmental development plan, linked closely to whole-school areas for improvement, and schemes of work are regularly reviewed and provide detailed support for all members of the department.
- Resources produced by the department are of high quality and are used well in lessons to challenge and support students of all ability levels.
- The department recognises that it could do more to enrich students' learning outside the formal classroom and thus encourage more students to opt for history in Years 10 and 11. It has established some historical visits but there is a demand for more, including from the students themselves.

### Subject issue: ICT in history

- Teachers have a detailed understanding of the value of ICT in the teaching and learning of history.
- They use it exceptionally well in the classroom and students themselves are often encouraged to reinforce their ICT skills, by use of the electronic whiteboard and also when producing their assignments.

- Students make very good use of the Internet for research and are given detailed advice on relevant websites to visit.

#### Inclusion

- As students say, 'Our teachers support us equally well, no matter what our abilities in history are.'
- Good achievement by students of all levels of ability and no failures at GCSE and A Level for three years demonstrate that the academic well-being of each individual is central to the work of the department. Moreover, teachers treat their students with respect and dignity and show that the personal development of their charges is of equal importance to the teachers.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- making sure that all students are offered sufficient opportunities to take responsibility for their own learning
- ensuring that the quality of marking is consistent and that all students benefit from advice on how they can improve their work
- increasing the number of enrichment activities open to students.

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 and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Jim Kidd  
Additional Inspector