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Mrs M Warnes  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Warnes,

Ofsted survey inspection programme: Art and design

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Janet Mercer HMI on 05 and 06 March 2008 to evaluate the effectiveness of art and design education.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit included a focus on the quality of assessment in art and design and its impact on students' 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 staff and students, link governor and primary headteacher, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observations of lessons or part lessons including a joint observation with the subject leader.

Art and design

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

Achievement and standards in art and design

Achievement and standards in art and design are outstanding.

- From the start, students of all abilities respond well to the high expectations of the department, make good progress in Years 7 to 9 and achieve above average standards. Whilst students join the school from a wide range of primary schools many have benefited from initiatives associated with the schools' specialist status in the visual arts. Some students build thoughtfully on prior experiences, for example the high quality self portrait work in Year 7 where familiar themes and skills are revisited but understanding about associated concepts is deepened, leading to mature work. Significant progress across the Key Stage is evident where students have used their understanding of other artists' work to inform their own work, the Year 9 lino block prints inspired by German Expressionism for example.
- A higher than average proportion of boys and girls pursue examination courses and continue to make good progress between Years 10 and 11, most exceeding their targets. A-C grades attained are consistently well above average. Boys do particularly well in relation to national comparisons and their other subjects. Creative work is achieved across a wide range of 2D, 3D and digital media, explicit where students have analysed specific visual elements through particular media, for example students' exploration of surface texture through photography. Work for different purposes ranging from a calendar printed commercially through to an art collection available for local businesses to loan and exhibit, achieves an excellent balance between freedom and diversity of students' ideas development with quality and professionalism of outcomes.
- Students from other schools in the area join the healthy number of Castle students who continue onto art related courses in the sixth form. Good standards are achieved overall. The positive shift in sophistication and application of students' achievements is accelerated by the connections they make to the work of contemporary artists, craftworkers and designers. Many students make direct reference to the work of local artists, strengthening the quality of observation and raising their own creative aspirations through first hand experience. For example the experimental but skilfully crafted series of maquettes created by the BTEC students who were inspired by Richard Long's work in Bristol. Students' use ICT effectively as a creative tool and this has a direct impact on the quality of outcomes for example in photography and also on the speed and quality of ideas development within other courses.
- Evidence of students' working practices is good but there is scope to deepen their understanding about the diverse ways in which different artists, craftworkers and designers develop ideas, interrogate themes, explore visual elements, in order to reflect, review, revisit and refine their work. Students' use of sketchbooks improves as they progress through the school but some students' dependency on secondary sources constrains their creative impact or ambition. Few students pursue different forms of drawing as a continuous skill to aid thinking for example in the subject and other areas of the curriculum.
- Students' personal development in the subject is exemplary. Many students show a very high level commitment to the subject in and between lessons. This is evident early on through students' curiosity and

active participation in discussion. Later, a significant proportion take several different art and design options to examination level, some through after school sessions. Their independence accelerates between Years 10 and 11 affording mature relationships post-16 when the dialogue between teachers and students is tutorial-style, preparing students very well to develop initiative and take responsibility. Students in all years and with different abilities value the contribution the subject makes to the development of their confidence and wider cultural awareness through their interactions in the school gallery.

## Quality of teaching and learning in art and design

Teaching and learning in art and design is outstanding overall.

- Teachers are knowledgeable, confident and enthusiastic, most effective when applying their distinctive contribution to subject teaching within the art and design department and arts faculty. This ranges from professional experience in the animation industry through to expertise about how to structure and present a self-review. A Year 13 student, evaluating her experience as part of the 'School Council Visual Art Review' also drew attention to the value of working with practising artists whose skills complement those of the teaching team, referring to a workshop with a textile artist as a 'real turning point in my own style of working'. The trust and respect that students show for staff is often related to their awareness of staff as teachers and artists. Opportunities for teaching and support staff to celebrate their creative diversity energise all who work in the department, particularly the students at post-16 whose interaction with a mixture of staff adds challenge. In Key Stage 3 attention needs to be given to how all students can learn from the most expert teaching.
- The quality of teaching and learning is significantly enhanced by a strong sense of collegiality across the school. Subject staff make a clear contribution to visual approaches to learning in other subjects. During the visit science and mathematics specialists expressed the view that specialist visual arts status contributed significantly to innovative teaching and active learning in their subjects. However, art and design specialists also gain from the whole school menu of professional development opportunities aimed at sharing best practice. For example, art and design lessons are shaped and paced by immediate engagement, effective time management, and probing questioning characteristic of the Secondary Strategy led by other subjects. Use of the school gallery by different subjects has created an excellent opportunity for further sharing to help students develop and apply transferable skills.

## Quality of the curriculum in art and design

The curriculum in art and design is outstanding.

- Students are provided with a breadth of opportunities to learn about art, craft and design from different times and places, including contemporary

practice integrated predominantly in the curriculum in students' later years. However, the 'Octagon Gallery' incorporated into the school but used frequently as a community resource brings all students into frequent contact with local, national and international artists, craftworkers and designers through exhibitions and workshops. The impact of a recent residency with graphic designer Damon Mahoney is evident in students' subject knowledge, understanding and skills at all levels but particularly where students have experienced genuine challenges associated with the interface between the creative industries and clients. Experience of collaboration, problem solving, community consultation were recognised by students as valuable key skills. A comprehensive programme of visits to national and international galleries build on local and school based experiences.

- The curriculum meets the needs and interests of different learners very effectively because the breadth of stimulus is matched with an extensive range of mixed-media and specialist courses students can select from to develop their own creativity. This includes a 'pathfinder' course for students preferring a less academic approach through to opportunities for students with a full programme of studies during the school day to extend their qualifications after school. Course design skilfully balances students' interests with objectives that support students' personal and cultural development. For example, a popular project which uses 'graffiti' as a starting point motivates boys and girls to research and to craft their interpretations in 3D with determination and accuracy. Whilst variety and unpredictability are strengths, the curriculum is not always underpinned by sufficient planning for continuity and progression between and within Key Stages. For example, early work by the more able students indicates that some are ready to respond to more differentiated starting points.

## Leadership and management of art and design

The leadership and management of art and design are outstanding.

- An extensive repertoire of school and subject leadership and management skills at all levels combine to keep the subject at the leading edge. Staff responsibilities are judiciously developed, sometimes involving imaginative roles such as that designed to widen opportunities for students to learn through visual communication across the curriculum. With the exception of the Arts Council Arts Award Scheme which is not yet established, the department embrace new initiatives enthusiastically. The 'Big Draw' and the 'Artsmark Award' are for example used strategically to help address objectives of the school and community action plan. The needs and interests of local and art community inform gallery and workshop programmes that students learn from and contribute to. The professional quality publication 'State of the Art' produced regularly and edited by students is an effective form of communication to all associated with the school and subject. Outreach work including that with local primary schools enables students to start with high expectations and clear intentions related to specialist visual arts status.

- A comprehensive range of formal and informal strategies are used to determine and develop the impact of the subject sensitively and perceptively. Sharply focused evaluation, meetings that promote development rather than routine business, showcasing, are examples. Clarity of vision and commitment at all levels creates the conditions for the subject to succeed. For example the link governor is knowledgeable about the work of the department and experienced in the creative industries. This is equally true of the headteacher who clearly values the contribution of the subject and specialism to the school's distinctiveness and drive for continuous improvement, in her own words by 'giving permission for creativity to flourish'.

Subject issue: The quality of assessment and its impact on students' progress and creativity.

- Teachers provide clear, constructive and enthusiastic feedback to students in lessons. In one session observed a teacher encouraged students by openly expressing his enjoyment 'I'm excited by this work'. In another the teacher had prepared for the lesson by attaching 'post-its' to students' work to provide precise feedback about specific strengths and weaknesses. Students are given a clear indication through discussion that originality is highly valued.
- Students' progress is accurately assessed and recorded in relation to national curriculum and examination objectives. However, the principles and purpose that drives the department are not entirely represented by the assessment criteria used and communicated to parents, including that related to students' creative development.

## Inclusion

- Inclusion in art and design is outstanding. The curriculum meets a very wide range of individual needs and interests. Teachers are supportive to students who find tasks particularly difficult but are equally able to challenge the more able students because staff are confident in their subject knowledge. A wide range of abilities choose to take art and design examinations and are successful. The subject is equally popular with boys and girls. The views of students inform the direction and development of the subject.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- increase students' understanding of different processes used by artists, craftworkers and designers in order to develop the use of sketchbooks
- ensure that the curriculum structures students' continuity and progression sufficiently while retaining diversity and depth of teaching.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop Art and design education and its impact on the school and community.

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

Ian Middleton  
Her Majesty's Inspector