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Mrs C M Abbott
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Dear Mrs Abbott

Ofsted survey inspection programme – history

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on Monday 14 April 2008 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 provision for gifted and talented history students.

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 four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory overall. Although attainment at the end of each key stage and in the sixth form is below national averages, the interventions made by the head of department since 2007 have resulted in satisfactory progress for most groups of students. Some students make good progress through Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form.

- Standards are below national averages at Key Stage 3. This is mostly because students enter the school with levels of ability in literacy which are well below those attained by students nationally and they make slow progress in their first three years. The department is very much aware of the gap between school results and national standards and is beginning to focus effectively on securing better performance in 2008.

- Standards at GCSE have fallen over the past three years, but are not too far behind national averages for history. Many students embark on their GCSE history with low levels of literacy and yet the school succeeded in securing a 100% A*-G pass rate in 2007. Current standards look much better in Year 10 and the department can demonstrate that many more students are on track to attain their targets. As a result, the proportion of students attaining A*-C grades is likely to be much higher this year than last, being at or above the national average for history. Nevertheless, white boys from low income backgrounds still underachieve.
- Standards in the sixth form are below those attained nationally, but again a number of students make good progress given their starting points. Able students develop well.
- Students have a good understanding of the key factual content of the history topics they study, particularly aspects of the modern world and Russia during the revolutionary years. They develop a good understanding of how things change over time and how some changes are more dramatic than others.
- Able students in Key Stages 3 and 4 are given satisfactory encouragement to develop their abilities and interests in history but they require further support to attain high quality work.
- Students enjoy their lessons and like being engaged in debates and discussions. They particularly enjoy debating about different cultures and lifestyles around the world at different times in the past and how conflicts can be about deep seated values which are difficult to solve. Their personal development is satisfactory.
- During each topic of study, students use information and communication technology (ICT) in history lessons in a variety of ways to enhance their understanding. They say they like best opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge on the interactive whiteboards.
- Self and peer assessment feature in lessons and is tied well to target setting and individual student tracking.

Quality of teaching and learning of history

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory but some good teaching was observed during the visit.

- Key learning objectives are displayed in lessons and teachers make sure that at the end of each lesson students review what they have learned.
- Students often use interactive whiteboards to show their ideas and answers.
- Information about topics is presented in interesting ways and lessons proceed at a quick pace. Occasionally teachers miss opportunities to challenge able students to produce work of really high quality.
- Key assessments are well planned and marked. More consistent procedures for moderating marking across the department are being introduced but in the books surveyed there remains inconsistency in the quality of comments made by teachers. Assessments using level descriptions are also being introduced. Although these are being used

well at Key Stage 4, at Key Stage 3 not all teachers are yet confident enough to employ them effectively.

- Teachers observed during the visit mostly managed their lessons well but students talked of some lessons that are unruly at times and there is a lack of consistency in the way teachers use the school's behaviour policy. Where support staff are used in lessons, they are deployed effectively to help their target groups of students learn.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is good.

- The curriculum covers the national curriculum programmes of study well and is the product of good planning by teachers across the department.
- There are good plans to introduce the new history curriculum and teachers have used their time well to make sure they understand the key concepts and processes to be developed.
- There are increasing opportunities for students identified as gifted in history to extend their knowledge and interests but more thought is needed to ensure work in class is challenging enough for this group.
- The department reviewed and changed the sixth form programme of topics when it was clear one topic area was not popular with students.

Leadership and management of history

The leadership and management of history are good.

- The head of department, appointed to the role just over a year ago, uses her experience and knowledge unflaggingly to ensure teachers across the school are given the support they need to teach history well.
- Training for the subject leader on the new history curriculum and providing for the more able students in history is leading to clear plans for raising standards still further.
- The departmental self-evaluation is an accurate outline of the current strengths of the subject in the school and what needs to be done to bring about further improvement. The head of department pulls no punches in her criticism of standards and achievement, but knows how to involve other teachers effectively in drawing up plans to address weaknesses. Interventions to improve standards are having a positive effect, but have yet to impact fully on all key stages.

Subject issue: provision for the gifted history students

- More opportunities are being provided for gifted students in history to develop their interests and abilities. However, the department's plans for these students are only recently being introduced and their impact has not been evaluated.
- Lesson plans identify gifted history students but often do not indicate clearly what is expected of them in lessons.

- Materials are being planned which will challenge gifted students even further but all teachers need to be involved in the thinking behind these so that they can use them well in lessons.
- Assessment practice in history needs to focus more on moving students to the highest levels of work and more regular guidance needs to be given to students about how they can do this. This is being undertaken well at sixth form level, but less well at Key Stage 3.

Inclusion

- Standards of all groups of students are below national expectations and the school's interventions to support better literacy are only slowly having a positive impact on results in history.
- Lessons take into account the needs of most groups of students and the students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make the same progress as their peers. However, the needs of gifted history students are not fully met.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving standards throughout the department, but especially at Key Stage 3
- exploring further how to increase challenge for more able students in history
- sharing more regularly with students, especially at Key Stage 3, how well they are doing in relation to level descriptions in history, and showing them more clearly how to move to higher levels
- improving the accuracy of teachers' assessment of students' work.

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

Peter Limm
Her Majesty's Inspector