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Dear Mr Gould

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Art and design

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 11 and 12 June 2008 to look at work in art and design.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the quality of assessment and its impact on pupils' 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, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work including the open evening for parents and observations of six lessons.

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

Achievement and standards in art and design

Achievement and standards are good.

- Students make good progress during Years 7 to 9. Boys and girls with different abilities respond particularly well to projects that develop their own interests and apply their imagination. Students handle a range of art media confidently and interpret the work of other artists with understanding. Their ability to abstract images is a strength.

- An average proportion of girls takes the subject in Years 10 and 11 and does well in relation to their other examinations. GCSE A*-C results in the subject are similar to the national picture but the proportion of boys and girls achieving A*-A grades is high. Nevertheless, the subject is less popular or successful for boys.
- Progress accelerates between Years 9 and 10 because students prepare well for the GCSE course by relating an aspect of visual language, often 'pattern', to direct experience. As one student expressed: 'it changes the way I look at everything from thereon'. However, more students could personalise their planning before starting GCSE and, in particular, use experimentation to discover the accidental and pursue the unpredictable.
- Students build effectively on their earlier strengths, making connections between their own work and that of contemporary artists more independently. Work exhibited in the school indicated that students are confident creating mixed-media and low-relief outcomes but few students fully exploit the craft of printmaking or ceramics.
- Students who continue onto AS and A-level courses achieve well and a good proportion progress onto art related courses and careers. The depth of personal research and exploration of challenging concepts are consistent strengths but the most successful work also leads to outcomes that have considerable impact when viewed independently.
- The subject makes a good contribution to students' personal development. Individual students with wide ranging ability develop and sustain a high level of commitment. During the visit a Year 8 boy shared a major project he had been working on all year, by taking a class project to its limits. A group following vocational courses centred at a local college were also observed working collaboratively and carefully in school. Most students work hard in and between lessons and express feelings confidently through the subject.

Quality of teaching and learning in art and design

Teaching and learning in art and design are good.

- Teachers have in-depth subject knowledge and integrate their own skills and interests as artists into their teaching. A consistent strength is seeing the potential of the locality as a context for 'live' projects and contact with 'living' artists. This makes a strong impact on students' understanding about the contribution of the subject to economic well-being because many students develop a clear understanding about how subject skills are applied.
- In all lessons observed different teachers had prepared well presented stimulus and guidance sheets that exemplified the expectations made of the students. For example, the shift in emphasis between Years 9 and 10 on the sketchbook as a personal journal is communicated through the images that support the written guidance. The art studios are of exceptional quality enhanced by displays and resources that promote students' pride in their own work and curiosity in others.

- During their first year in new accommodation teachers have used the high level of information and communication technology (ICT) equipment and resources inclusively. Whilst the impact on options and examination achievement is not fully realised yet boys and girls are highly motivated by opportunities to develop their imagination through digital media. This was particularly evident in a Year 9 group observed which related their interest in 'Personal Pop' culture, inspired by the imagery of the artist Peter Blake, to identity.
- Students respect the specialist skills of teachers and where practical appreciate opportunities to consult teachers on the basis of their individual needs, ideas or technical challenges. However, despite the good quality of their individual projects, some students were unconvinced about the equality of their experiences or coherence of their learning particularly when timetabled with more than one teacher.
- Whilst teacher demonstration or technical talk sometimes dominates, time is generally managed well and intervention is used strategically to ensure that the pace of learning remains brisk. Teachers observe and evaluate the responses of students skilfully to balance whole class with individual support. One student observed that 'the ethos is motivating without exerting unnecessary pressure.'
- Teachers consider carefully how different students best learn. All students are equipped with the skills to make informed criticisms about the work of other artists. In a Year 9 lesson observed students' understanding about the difference between 2D and 3D was deepened due to an imaginative and fun group activity designed to interest and motivate all, including those not continuing to GCSE.

Quality of the curriculum in art and design

The curriculum in art and design is good.

- The curriculum builds on students' experiences at primary school by inviting students to share their existing skills, knowledge and understanding through a welcome activity in Year 7. This provides useful evidence for baseline assessment but does not currently involve primary schools in adding further evidence about students' individual successes, challenges or course content that might be repeated.
- In Key Stage 3 a strength of the curriculum is the breadth of opportunity that students have to work in 2D, 3D and digital media. A wide range of artists, craftworkers and designers are referenced. These include contemporary artists whose work often links to current issues, or experiences that students identify with. There is a good balance with cultural themes that have historically influenced artists over time.
- In Key Stage 4 a challenging bridging project across Years 9 and 10 stimulates links between different artists' work besides deepening the connections students make to their own work. Time allowed for finished pieces does not always enable students to carry an idea fully through using particular media or techniques but this option is starting to increase with specialist studios that match the expertise of staff.
- In the sixth form sensitive intervention is a key element of the curriculum. This includes advice about the use of external resources such as life drawing to challenge students' observation and drawing.

- In all key stages students are given good opportunities to visit local and national art galleries and museums. Local resources and contexts are used particularly well. Competitions and community projects such as murals for the St. Stephen's subway or visits to the 'Norfolk Open Studios' scheme contribute to students' understanding about the relevance of the subject.
- The curriculum specifically contributes to students' personal development through projects such as the waste electrical 'WE Man' initiative which promoted students' engagement with environmental issues through a creative experience that involved many parents too. The 'art in a box' project encouraged students to reflect deeply on their personal aspirations. The department is well placed to add to accreditation currently available through initiatives such as the Arts Award scheme or Creative and Media Diploma.

Leadership and management of art and design

The leadership and management of art and design are good.

- The department has a high profile in the school, underpinned by an experienced and well informed subject leader, complemented by able, committed teachers who, as a team, are popular and respected by students. These qualities have impacted positively on a good balance achieved by all; between traditional and new media, historical and contemporary references, direct teaching and students' independence.
- Regular monitoring by the subject leader and yourself evaluate the quality of teaching as consistently good or better. However, staff are encouraged to interpret the curriculum individually and where possible deploy their specific strengths. A balance is achieved between the range of students' experiences and their entitlement but nevertheless some expressed the view that they would like additional choice.
- Self-evaluation is used effectively. For example the need to revisit the teaching of drawing is a shared priority informed by perceptive analysis of students' work. Progress in evaluating the department's contribution to whole school priorities are well informed by self-evaluation on an individual level. Nevertheless, subject specific issues such as variation between performance of boys and girls could be more explicit.
- During the inspection an exhibition of work by sixth form students opened to governors, parents, staff and other students. A genuine 'sense of occasion' was managed which celebrated students' achievements publicly. However, the exhibition was also used critically by students and teachers to challenge the ideas and aspirations of those exhibiting as well as younger artists at the school.
- Now established in specialist studios that are adjacent to each other and complementary subjects, a strong teaching team and good track record of student achievement indicate good capacity for continuous improvement.

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

This is good.

- Students in Years 7 to 9 receive regular feedback through discussion with teachers, group evaluations with their peers and through marking. The checklist that students maintain about their coverage of skills is a missed opportunity to develop students' self-evaluation.
- In Years 10 to 11 student self-assessment is used effectively alongside teacher assessment. Discussion when grades are moderated contributes to students' understanding about their progress in relation to specific examination objectives. Lessons add clarity because teachers make direct reference to the features of A* work.
- The teaching approaches used at AS and A-level are based upon continuous review. Students are clear about the features of their work that satisfy examination objectives and the characteristics of creativity.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- support students in assessing their starting points and progress in developing subject skills, knowledge and understanding from the start
- enable students to experience more of the approaches and challenges of examination courses during Key Stage 3
- increase course uptake and success for boys
- encourage students to discover the depths of different media as they progress through school, including printmaking, ceramics and textiles.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop art and design across 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

Ian Middleton
Her Majesty's Inspector