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Mr T Johnson
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Dear Mr Johnson

Ofsted subject survey: Identifying good practice in Art and design

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 6 May 2008 to focus on the impact of the visual arts on the 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 without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included discussions with members of staff and students, analysis of key documentation and case studies relating to community projects and a visit to the Dudley Art gallery and Museum to evaluate a public exhibition by students and adult learners.

Features of good practice observed

The school community

- The presence of work by students, adult learners and local artists exhibited across the school reinforces the identity of the school as a community with specialist status for the visual arts. Displays are well respected by the students and those themed to particular subject areas promote links which are developed through cross-curricular projects.
- A wide range of paired initiatives between visual arts and another subject promote the enjoyment and engagement of students in learning. For example, the Year 9 mathematics focus on tessellation developed into complex designs for a ceramic tile mosaic enabled students to see how their learning might be applied in the commercial world.

- Subject initiatives incorporate Information and Communications Technology (ICT) effectively to develop students' research skills, ideas and understanding in order to improve their achievements. For example, the Year 9 travel poster project with French enabled students to develop and apply their vocabulary whilst learning how graphic designers work.
- The subject, through specialist status, addresses priorities of the whole school community. For example, the extensive range of outreach to primary schools, in particular through 'identity' work led by the shared artist-in-residence, responds to the 2005 inspection which reported that 'some younger pupils find it hard to adjust to life in a larger school.'
- A strength of students' personal development and well-being evident in the subject is their ability to build the confidence to explore new ground by revisiting and reflecting on their previous achievements. Whilst this represents 'risk-taking' particularly in examinations, it is highly valued when students continue onto post-16 art related courses as many do.

The local community

- The extended schools programme provides an extensive range of educational and recreational provision for the local community. These include intergenerational projects that promote co-operative relationships through collaboration. Working together as families or mixtures of age, skills or experience complement curriculum and lesson objectives.
- The cultural diversity of the local community is consciously embraced through the subject. Students often communicate their personal experiences confidently. For example, one student interpreted domestic interiors inspired by the work of Patrick Caulfield with colour and symbolism associated with his own experience of Asian culture. Several students also use textiles effectively to embed a narrative of experiences.
- Students use the subject effectively to communicate interest in, and respect for, people and places in the locality. For example, one student had created a mixed-media image representing the 'Iron Duke', a local scrap dealer and character who was also the students' grandfather. Another created a photomontage of the school inspired by David Hockney.
- By using the work of local artists who have achieved widespread recognition, students are able to see first hand that their aspirations need no limits. For example, a huge landscape painting by Black Country artist Robert Perry hanging in the school heightens students' creative aspirations, which they see as attainable when supported by workshops with the artist.
- A sustained partnership with a local hospital, Russell Hall, has established a continuous exhibition of students' work for patients, staff and visitors to enjoy. Displays often communicate students' interest in and appreciation of, places of interest in the local community. For example, work inspired by 'Daisy Bank'.

The wider community

- Students' outlook is broadened by direct experience of national initiatives. For example, the Royal Academy 'Outreach' programme and the Campaign for Drawing 'Big Draw' enable students to develop key subject skills as part of a nationwide programme. National dissemination provides students with feedback about how their achievements sit within a wider context.
- A good proportion of students use the subject to communicate their feelings about issues in the wider community. For example, some projects explore aspects of popular culture and through provocative imagery express clear views about issues such as the impact of addiction on celebrity. Some students consider art media their most fluent form of communication.
- Political issues are tackled too through the interpretation of given themes that promote wider reading and research. For example, students have explored the political issues that underpinned the 'Twin Towers' in order to use imagery persuasively.
- Students' knowledge of the wider creative industries is evident and developing through their use of ICT and growing understanding about the range of current applications. This is skilfully balanced with projects that make connections with local industry. For example, projects linked to Stourbridge Glass and Jackfield Ceramics show how the local community has been historically linked with the wider industrial world.
- The school uses the subject effectively to make a contribution to the wider community. For example, imagery produced for the 'Dudley Children and Young People's Plan' makes a locally distinctive contribution to the national 'Every Child Matters' initiative. In another example students' work published by the Commission for Racial Equality uses their imagery alongside personal reflection to promote anti-racism nationally.

Areas for development which were shared during the visit

- Evaluate the impact of community focused initiatives by adding to the excellent visual record with evaluation by target groups that focus on their improvements in relation to their starting points.
- Exchange initiatives that address community issues with other specialist arts colleges in similar and different contexts to share best practice and develop provision for example focused on the UK and global community.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop the gallery in school. As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Ian Middleton
Her Majesty's Inspector