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Mr J Welsh
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Welsh

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Creative Learning: Personal Achievement

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 03 June 2008 to look at creative learning.

As outlined in the pre-visit letter, the visit had a particular focus on the ways in which you develop creative learning and the impact this is having on achievement and standards and on students' personal development.

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 a number of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of the school's development of creative learning was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards, personal development and well-being

Although achievement and standards dipped in 2007, there has been a marked improvement over the past three years in students' rate of progress and the standards reached. Standards attained by the end of Year 9 compare well with national averages, especially in English and mathematics. While the proportion of students gaining five or more A*-C GCSE grades remains below national averages, the improvement since 2005 has been dramatic. Over this period, attendance rates, punctuality and behaviour have also improved significantly. The school's leadership and management link this overall

improvement to the development of a more creative style of learning, spreading out originally from the expressive arts across the curriculum. Displayed work, assessment and tracking data and the level of constructive engagement observed in lessons support this view. Students speak emphatically of their sense of personal achievement and many have high aspirations.

Quality of teaching and learning

There is evidence of good practice across the curriculum, with teachers ensuring that students are encouraged to be questioning, independent and purposeful. In the lessons observed, students used role play, group work, raps and experimentation to develop and evaluate ideas about subjects as varied as Shakespeare, slavery, ecosystems and the interior angles of a polygon. They are able to work collaboratively and independently, to question and hypothesise and to present their findings for peer review. As a student observed, they learn how to 'think on our own two feet and work together'. The school has not yet developed a systematic way of assessing the process of creative learning other than through the formal end product. Feedback to students does not consistently balance encouragement with specific guidance on how to improve. This is recognised and is being addressed.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum, especially in Years 7 to 9, strongly supports the development of creative learning, building on National Curriculum foundations. There are many good examples of productive collaboration between departments, such as art work based on the science of light and sound, documentary film-making to explore and present topics in history and creation of a mural displaying mathematical patterns, symmetry and repetition in nature. Individual departments have also developed schemes of work that combine a variety of sources, activities and presentation methods. The school works well with a variety of practitioners, largely through the government-funded Creative Partnership scheme, to bring a range of expertise into school, to contribute to cross-curricular projects and to extend students' cultural and social experience. It also contributes actively to a number of inter-school collaborations.

Leadership and management

Well supported by your governing body and senior leadership team, you have seen the investment of time and resources in developing creative learning as an effective way to raise standards and enhance your students' personal development. The major impact has been on students' morale and their expectations. The annual fund you have set up to encourage departments to be enterprising in their support for creative learning has successfully concentrated minds and underlined the importance to the school of a culture of creative learning. The school's development plan requires each department to produce at least one module taught in a way explicitly designed to promote enquiry, independence, cross-curricular thinking and self-assessment against

challenging standards. The school is now over-subscribed and has attained specialist status as an arts college.

Equality and diversity

The school's development of more active, less formalised approaches to learning and assessment encourages students of all abilities and backgrounds to take part confidently. Those who struggle with traditional academic disciplines can and do shine in activities that are recognised as worthwhile and productive. This is an inclusive and cohesive community, in which all students are treated with respect and given many opportunities to achieve.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that feedback to students combines challenge and guidance with encouragement, so that students are clear about how to improve
- developing methods of assessing the process of creative learning.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to encourage and evaluate creative learning throughout your school.

As was 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

Patricia Metham
Her Majesty's Inspector