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Ms W Cooper
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Cooper

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Creative Learning

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 2-3 July to look at creative learning.

As outlined in our initial letter, the visit had a particular focus on the ways in which you develop creative learning and the impact these are 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 senior managers and with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of ten lessons and of lunchtime and after-school music groups.

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

Achievement and standards and personal development

Your students' attainment on entry is below the national average. Over 40% have English as an acquired language; some join the school with a very limited grasp of the language and make impressive progress in speaking and understanding, although their writing skills improve more slowly. In-school data indicate recent improvement, but results in formal tests at the end of Years 9 and 11 do not currently compare well with national figures, except in subjects such as art and design, dance and music. There is vivid evidence of the good progress made by students of all abilities and backgrounds in activities focusing on creative styles of learning. Imaginative use of

information and communication technology (ICT), of graphics, animation, photography and film, music and dance has made a choice of subjects accessible to students who struggle with more traditional approaches. This has opened up pathways to national accreditation and future training or employment. The high standards reached in visual, performance and media arts by students across the school's age range have earned wide recognition through projects with leading organisations such as the Tate Modern, National Gallery, Ballet Rambert, National Theatre and BBC.

Students have some difficulty in transferring skills and ways of thinking from practical and performance-based subjects to those calling for more traditional approaches and assessed in a more academic way. A key challenge is to improve their ability to write accurately and fluently in the range of styles demanded by subjects across the curriculum. A further challenge is to find ways of assessing progress through the processes involved in creative learning that can be applied effectively to all subjects.

Your students thrive in a culture that positively promotes independent thinking, collaboration, active problem-solving, inventiveness and self-confidence. It is well understood that a work of art or a performance must be as good as it can be; success is energetically pursued and valued. This spills over into all areas of activity in the school; students have no inhibitions about being seen to do well and respect each other's successes.

Quality of teaching and learning in relation to the survey

Much work has clearly been done to bring consistency of approach and expectation to lesson planning. Emphasis is well placed on students' self-evaluation, peer review, group work and experimentation. Most teachers use open questions productively to stimulate discussion, and most students respond with cheerful confidence. Some subjects are taught in ability sets but the full range of students' skill and knowledge is not always fully supported. There are excellent examples of core and foundation subjects using imaginative, cross-curricular approaches to engage and challenge students, for example the mathematics and music programme and the placing of science investigations into a drama or narrative framework. Not all subjects, however, have yet found ways in which to encourage the lively, interactive and creative style of learning so well modelled in the visual and performance arts. The 'Talk to Learn' project, established in association with Exeter University, is giving students and, as yet, a small group of teachers the opportunity to learn from each other about effective teaching and learning.

Quality of the curriculum

The school's curriculum offers outstanding opportunities for creative learning while ensuring that National Curriculum content and skills are well covered. Its media arts and music specialisms are being imaginatively used to drive achievement in subjects such as modern languages, mathematics and science. Priority is given to supporting initiatives that promote creative learning, for example the 'eleventh day' programme. Suspending the timetable every eleventh day allows for extended projects and cross-curricular

enrichment activities. There is a wide-ranging programme of visits and visiting practitioners, including high profile participation in national arts projects. The school is preparing to pilot the Creative Arts and Media Diploma, starting in September 2008 with Year 9 students.

Leadership and management of the aspect

Leadership and management at all levels in your school are providing good support for creative learning, both in the deployment of time and resources and in the culture you are actively promoting. Through participation in national projects and partnerships you take full advantage of opportunities to extend and enhance your students' experience of education and their chances of future success. Your school well justifies its specialist status for media arts and music, in the high expectations and high standards achieved by your students in these areas and in the support you give to local schools. You understand the need to raise overall standards, especially in the core subjects, and are taking appropriate action. Despite the difficulties caused by your split site and the frustrations of working in buildings much in need of modernisation, morale is high and students are confident that the school will help them identify and develop their individual talents successfully.

Equality and diversity

This is a very diverse community. Some students join the school late, coming from challenging circumstances and with little or no understanding of English. The school has outstanding success in finding ways in which to integrate and encourage students of all backgrounds and abilities, giving them the skills, the confidence and the opportunity to tackle courses that lead to accreditation and future training and employment.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- extending current cross-curricular initiatives to involve more subjects
- adapting teaching and learning styles that bring high attainment in the arts to raise standards in core subjects, especially to support students' writing skills.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop creative styles of learning in your school.

As explained in our 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