

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 0207 421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Ms F Hegarty
Headteacher
St John Fisher Catholic High School
Ashfields New Road
Newcastle
Staffordshire
ST5 2S

Dear Ms Hegarty

Ofsted survey inspection programme – history

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 16 September 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 information and communication technology (ICT) in history and 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, a scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in Key Stages 3 and 4 is outstanding and good in the sixth form. Standards are excellent by the end of Key Stage 3 and excellent at GCSE. Standards in the sixth form are good.

- Students make good progress in their first year and then excellent progress in developing their historical knowledge and understanding by the end of Key Stage 4. Progress is good in the sixth form but the department is aware that the overall rate of progress could be better.
- Students say they enjoy history, especially when it engages them fully in the topics being studied. They are enthusiastic learners. Students in Key Stages 3 and 4 spoke confidently about what they considered to be the 'lessons of history' and used accurate and wide ranging

examples to support their ideas. Students in the sixth form were similarly impressive in the way they reflected upon thorny issues about the nature of the subject.

- Historical skills are being developed extremely well, with students' understanding of how historians differ in their interpretations of historical events being clearly evident in their work and their responses to me.
- Students have confidence to ask a good range of interesting questions in class and to seek answers using websites and other computer based materials. The work produced by students in Year 9 was particularly impressive in demonstrating their ability to sift through large amounts of information to generate succinct and pertinent PowerPoint presentations on key people or ideas.
- Students' personal development in history is outstanding. They are highly motivated and generally fully engaged in their learning. They behave extremely well and reflect the general ethos of the school admirably. They respect each others' views and engage positively in collaborative activities.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is outstanding in Key Stages 3 and 4 and good in the sixth form.

- Teachers' subject knowledge is extremely good and they engage students well in lessons.
- Lessons are very well planned, have clear objectives and are suitably varied and challenging for students, except that opportunities are missed to extend the most able historians appropriately.
- Learning is extremely good in Key Stages 3 and 4 and good in the sixth form, although on some occasions students are not pressed enough to complete their extension work. There is extremely good support for students to develop their extended writing skills.
- Work is marked carefully and accurately and students are kept regularly informed about how well they are doing. A rich data base of assessment results helps teachers and parents to monitor student progress very carefully and to decide how best to give extra support for those who fall behind.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is outstanding.

- The curriculum meets all requirements and is broad and balanced. The plans for the new history curriculum at Key Stage 3 have been most carefully and imaginatively completed and the resulting three-year programme is clear, linked well to assessment requirements and success indicators. It is hoped that these changes will persuade more students to opt for history at Key Stage 4. The sixth form curriculum has also been reviewed and changed to meet the varied needs and interests of sixth form historians and is already proving popular with students.

- The history curriculum helps the subject to contribute very well to the school's requirement to foster community cohesion. It does this by enabling students in each year to study and reflect upon key local history topics, important national issues relating to current problems and global events.
- There are good links with other departments, especially modern foreign languages with joint trips abroad.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management of history are outstanding.

- The head of department is also head of classical studies and has grown into both roles extremely well. His reflective and conscientious approach ensures that history is planned and taught extremely well. He has a very clear appreciation of the strengths and areas for improvement within the subject. His self-evaluation is clear and accurate. He supports other history teachers very well.
- Teachers work very well together and form an excellent team, focused continually on improving standards and achievement and on developing approaches to teaching and learning which will secure these.
- The subject is organised extremely well and all resources are utilised effectively and efficiently. The subject has also benefited from strong and productive links with the local authority subject adviser.
- The subject is well regarded within the school.

Subject issue: ICT

The use of ICT is outstanding.

- All students have regular opportunities to use computers and in-class interactive whiteboards and work that is produced by students is extremely good.
- Students use computers regularly to research information for PowerPoint presentations, for the construction of leaflets for display in history classrooms, and for making notes and completing other written assignments. This variety of work helps students to develop both their ICT and history skills extremely well.

Subject issue: provision for gifted and talented history students

Provision is good.

- Gifted young historians have been identified for all years and their names are clearly shown on lesson plans.
- More able students achieve well in history.
- The school has appointed a lead teacher for gifted and talented provision and she is developing effective approaches to disseminating good ideas and activities for subjects to follow. History is in the forefront of this process.

- Gifted history students are able to talk confidently about the nature of history and their sense of the past, but are not given sufficient opportunities to explore these aspects appropriately in lessons.
- Extension work is identified on lessons plans, but this is not matched closely enough to the needs of individual gifted history students.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- developing more challenging activities and assignments for able history students
- securing better overall progress for sixth form students
- making sure the new Key Stage 3 curriculum attracts more students to study GCSE history.

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