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Mr G MacMahon
Headteacher
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Dear Mr MacMahon

Ofsted survey inspection programme – history

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 18 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

At Key Stage 3 and in the sixth form achievement is outstanding and standards are well above average. Students' rate of progress has been outstanding at GCSE but it has slowed in the last two years. Standards at GCSE are average.

- Students make outstanding progress in Years 7 to 9 in developing their historical knowledge and understanding. Progress is good during Key Stage 4 but the department is acutely aware that overall standards have been depressed over the past two years by underperformance in one of the GCSE papers. Performance in the other paper is excellent. The department has taken advice from the examination board and the

- chief examiner and has put in place a well-considered action plan to address the issues identified. Progress is outstanding in the sixth form.
- Students say they lessons are stimulating and often good fun. They are motivated to do well and work hard. Students in Key Stages 3 and 4 spoke confidently about what they thought were the 'lessons of history' and how, although historians use their imaginations, they cannot simply make things up. They used many accurate examples from across their experience of history. Students in the sixth form were similarly impressive in the way they reflected upon the nature of history by comparison with literature, drama and films.
 - Historical skills are being developed extremely well, and extended writing is a real strength of essay work and projects. Sixth formers felt that early development of extended writing skills cushioned the usual shock of transition between key stages.
 - Students have confidence to ask interesting and perceptive questions in class and collaborate very well in pairs and small group discussions. They speak very well when asked to report back to the whole class. The excellent support for small groups of students in Key Stage 3 who require more individual attention helps all students to continue to study the full history curriculum and make excellent progress.
 - Students' personal development in history is outstanding. They are highly motivated and fully engaged in their learning. They behave extremely well.
 - Students said they were attracted by the courses and find them enjoyable.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is outstanding.

- 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. The department has begun to address well the needs of more able students but acknowledges that more work is required to ensure that all able students are challenged fully to demonstrate exceptional performance.
- Work is marked carefully and accurately and students are kept regularly informed about how well they are doing. The adoption of Easiteach software has enabled teachers to accumulate an excellent range of teaching materials and strategies which students find stimulating. Learning has been enriched and enlivened by this computer based programme. Formal assessments are particularly well planned and students indicated they enjoyed these tasks.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is outstanding.

- The curriculum meets all requirements and is broad and balanced. The department has been able to plan adopt the new history curriculum easily and effectively and this spans all three years at Key Stage 3.

History is very popular at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form. Students said they were attracted by the courses and find them enjoyable.

- The history curriculum helps the subject to contribute very well to the school's requirement to foster community cohesion and there are growing links to schools in different parts of the world.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management of history are outstanding.

- The head of department has developed an excellent team of enthusiastic and committed history teachers. Whilst she is on maternity leave the acting head of department provides excellent leadership and enables the department to remain focused on securing improved results at GCSE and introducing the new Key Stage 3 curriculum. All teachers have a very clear understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement within the subject.
- The subject is organised extremely well and all resources are utilised effectively and efficiently.
- 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. Students told me they particularly liked opportunities to interact with the whiteboards and talk from the front about their ideas.
- Students have good access to computers and many use laptops in class to bolster their learning. This is particularly evident in tasks undertaken using the Easiteach programme at Key Stage 3.

Subject issue: provision for gifted and talented history students

Provision is good.

- Gifted young historians have been identified for all years.
- More able students achieve well in history.
- The acting head of department is also a lead teacher for gifted and talented provision and she is developing effective approaches to disseminating good ideas and activities for subjects to follow. She works well with the school's Gifted and Talented Co-ordinator and benefits from helping to introduce the Challenge Award across the school. History is in the forefront of developing approaches to meeting the needs of more able students in the school.
- Gifted history students are able to talk confidently about the nature of history and their sense of the past, but some of them require more challenge to demonstrate their high ability.
- 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 standards at GCSE.

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