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Dear Mrs Foster

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages.

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and those of your staff and students, during my visit on 26-27 November 2008 to look at work in modern languages (ML).

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on how information and communication technology (ICT) is being used by teachers and students to improve language learning. It also looked at where you are in reaching the benchmarks for provision in Key Stage 4.

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 nominated staff, groups of students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML was judged to be good.

Context

In 2003 the school changed the language that the majority of students learn from French to Spanish. Students in new cohorts joining the school learned Spanish. The last cohort of students studying French as their main language took their GCSE examinations in 2008.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is good. Standards are average overall.

- In 2007, standards at Key Stage 3 were above average. Provisional results for 2008 suggest that they have risen slightly and that over a quarter of students achieved the higher Level 6.
- At Key Stage 4, standards are now broadly average. In 2007, results at GCSE level were well below average in both French and Spanish. Provisional results for 2008 indicate that there has been a very strong improvement in French. There has also been some improvement in the results of examinations in Spanish which in both 2007 and 2008 were taken by groups of lower attaining students.
- The progress made by students in lessons observed during the visit was good overall. This was especially the case when teaching was challenging and fast paced. Where progress was not as good, it was partly because students were not given sufficient opportunities to practise their speaking skills and new concepts.
- Students from minority ethnic backgrounds, although very few in number, are encouraged to take qualifications in their home language and those who did so in 2007 attained above average results.
- Students are enthusiastic about learning a language and have a satisfactory understanding of how it can benefit their future economic well-being.
- Students' writing is good and most students' speaking skills are developing well. For example, in one good Year 8 lesson, students enthusiastically and confidently answered questions about families and several gave extended answers. Reading at the higher level is an area that the school has appropriately identified for development.
- Students' intercultural understanding is satisfactory. It is stronger at Key Stage 4 than it is in Key Stage 3.
- Language learning makes a satisfactory contribution to students' personal development and well-being.

Quality of teaching and learning in ML

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- The quality of teaching observed during the visit was mainly good although two of the six lessons observed were satisfactory. Where it was at its best, teaching was fast paced, lively and used a wide variety of activities that interested and stimulated students. Learning objectives for lessons are displayed and often referred back to by teachers. Teaching was characterised by high expectations and a strong focus on enabling students to practise and apply new vocabulary and concepts.
- Working relationships between learners and staff are good.

- Teachers' subject knowledge and pronunciation are good. Teachers make effective use of the target language in lessons, thus providing good role models for students. There is a good emphasis on ensuring that students pronounce new vocabulary correctly. Occasionally, opportunities for practising speaking skills are not always fully exploited. Students have appropriate opportunities to write creatively and at length.
- A wide range of stimulating resources and interesting activities are used to enhance learning, such as music, colourful and high quality worksheets, quizzes, practical activities and ICT.
- Formal assessments each half term ensure that all students know the level they are working at and what they must do to improve. There is good use of assessment stickers which are filled in sometimes by teachers and sometimes by students' peers. These further inform students on how well they are doing. Work is regularly marked although there is some scope for more specific comments by teachers in day-to-day marking on how students can improve.
- Planning follows the school's agreed format. It identifies students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and is detailed and evaluated.
- Classroom displays feature much useful vocabulary and some cultural information. 'Learning walls' are well used to support less able students with key words and information on current topics. There are few examples of exemplary work which can inspire students.
- A range of language learning strategies is used to develop students' skills, such as sound-spelling links, and there was some use of cognates.
- Students who are withdrawn for literacy support are well supported when they are re-integrated into language learning through one-to-one tutorials with their class teacher.
- Good opportunities are created for creative language learning. A good joint Spanish and drama lesson in the Arts Theatre provided Year 7 students with good facilities for role play where Spanish greetings and conversations could be easily practised.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory with good features.

- All students in each year group study a language in Key Stage 3 and in Key Stage 4. The main language is Spanish, to which the school switched five years ago in order to better build on the interests of students, parents and local primary schools. Higher attaining students, who have achieved a good GCSE grade in Spanish in Year 9, take up French in Key Stage 4.
- Although few in number, students whose first language is not English are encouraged to take qualifications in their home language. There is scope to make more use of these students' language skills to inspire other students.

- Enrichment activities contribute to language learning. There are a number of well-supported trips to Spain and France and some native French speakers have visited the school. A number of clubs exist such as those for Japanese, Spanish and German.
- The time set aside for languages learning is suitable.
- Schemes of work are satisfactory and those for Key Stage 3 are supplemented by school designed material which focuses on a thematic approach which aims to reflect students' interests. However, these do not always emphasis sufficiently opportunities to practise speaking skills.
- Strong links exist with feeder primary schools where older pupils are taught Spanish by an outreach teacher from the school. Recently, a teaching assistant has begun to teach Japanese in these schools. There is scope for the school to use formal assessment information of new intakes based on its work in local primary schools.
- A good range of language resources are available to students on the department's website and are used by them for homework and revision. However, there are no foreign language magazines, books or comics available for students to read for pleasure.

Leadership and management of ML

Leadership and management are good.

- The senior leadership team is strongly committed to ensuring that all students in all year groups study a language.
- The subject leader is effective, well-informed and focused on improving standards and provision. He has overseen the rise in standards in both key stages. Careful consideration is given to how staff are deployed. For example, teaching assistants work closely in lessons with students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD).
- The department's self-evaluation of its effectiveness is thorough and accurate. It is based on a good analysis of assessment and tracking data and information from pupil questionnaires. The departmental improvement plan is closely linked to the school's priorities.
- The subject leader is aware of the strengths and areas for development in the department and provides coaching for staff where appropriate. Arrangements for the professional development of teachers are sound.
- A high priority is placed on the use of ICT and the subject leader leads by example in this respect.
- The department is not afraid to try innovative ways of teaching languages, some of which involve imaginative use of ICT. Good links are being forged with other departments, such as the drama department, to find interesting ways to teach languages.
- There are good arrangements for intervention and support. A summer school supports those Year 6 students transferring to the school who have not learned Spanish in primary school. An Easter school provides

revision opportunities for students in Years 9 and 11. Staff give freely of their time after school and some weekend study sessions are also held.

How close the school is to reaching the benchmarks for language take-up in Key Stage 4

- The school exceeds the higher benchmark of 90% for language take-up in Key Stage 4.
- The school has a strong commitment to learning 'languages for languages' sake' and recognises the cultural and future economic benefits to students.

How well is ICT used by teachers and students to improve language learning?

This is good.

- The department is well resourced with an interactive whiteboard in each classroom and a bank of portable laptops. The latter is used to enable students to practise their skills and to develop extended writing.
- ICT is a regular feature in language teaching and was used in each lesson observed. For example, in the joint Spanish and drama lesson, students' conversations in Spanish were recorded on video for later discussion.
- Electronic whiteboards are used to make learning interesting and stimulating, to introduce new vocabulary and provide good opportunities for reading. They are also used to enable students to listen to native speakers.
- Use of ICT is often creative. Recently, the department used the internet to look at Spanish street life through web-cams sited in towns in Spain. The department has also experimented in using the whiteboard to play pre-recorded segments of lessons to provide continuity for planned absences.
- Students have access to a departmental website which hosts learning and revision materials.
- Students also use tape recorders to develop their listening skills.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring opportunities for speaking are fully exploited
- improving reading resources to enable students to read for pleasure
- developing further students' intercultural understanding.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Michael McIlroy
Her Majesty's Inspector