

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 020 7421 6855
www.ofsted.gov.uk
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk



28 November 2008

Mr P McKenna
Headteacher
St Bede's Catholic Comprehensive School
Westway
Peterlee
County Durham
SR8 1DE

Dear Mr McKenna

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages.

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and for the help of your staff and students, during my visit on 19-20 November 2008 to look at work in modern languages.

As outlined in the 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 included: interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of modern languages was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory.

- The number of students entered for a GCSE in modern languages is low and the proportions that gain a pass at A*-C and at A*-A are below average. Students do less well in languages than in their other subjects.

- At Key Stage 3, although the school's own assessment data suggest that standards are above average, students are not working securely within the levels expected for their age.
- When speaking, students rely too heavily on written support. They are unable to create their own sentences unless given a framework. Their pronunciation is usually accurate though heavily anglicised. They do not fully understand the links between how words are spelled and how they are pronounced.
- Students' writing in Key Stage 4 is good; they use a suitable range of expressions and structures, including different tenses and a rich variety of connectives. At Key Stage 3 much of their writing is limited to single words or short sentences.
- When listening to a native speaker, students do not always understand what has been said because it is spoken too fast or the word order is slightly different from what they are used to.
- Students at Key Stage 4 are highly motivated. They work well on their own and when collaborating with their class mates. They appreciate the benefits of learning a language. At Key Stage 3 many do not enjoy the subject and do not work very hard in lessons.

Quality of teaching and learning in modern languages

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory.

- Teachers plan their lessons to build on students' prior learning. They explain what they intend the students to learn and prepare activities to enable them to make at least satisfactory progress.
- In Key Stage 4, teaching is good because the teachers devise activities that interest the students and which make them think carefully about the work. These lessons cover a lot of useful language and enable students to make their writing increasingly sophisticated.
- In Key Stage 3, teaching is generally satisfactory though sometimes unsatisfactory. Teachers give clear instructions and make sure the students behave well and complete the work set. Some lessons are dull and fail to capture students' interest or imagination. Expectations are too low, particularly for the most able students. Not enough attention is paid to developing students' speaking and listening skills. Occasionally students carry out tasks without knowing the meaning of the words they are using.
- Teachers' assessment of the students' progress is inaccurate. Often it is too generous, particularly in Spanish, as it is based on too narrow an interpretation of the criteria.
- Students know their targets very well but some are unsure how they were arrived at and get limited guidance on how to achieve them. Their progress is tracked closely but the department does not plan systematic interventions for those at risk of underachieving.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- The time allocation and organisation of teaching groups are appropriate.
- Students are happy that the school offers them the chance to learn either French or Spanish. A small number learn both.
- The content of the curriculum at Key Stage 4 provides students with adequate preparation for the GCSE examination.
- The content of the curriculum at Key Stage 3 is unimaginative. It offers few opportunities for students to be creative. Some units of work are covered at a very slow rate and students resent this. The new National Curriculum requirements have so far had little effect on the subject.
- The schemes of work for the two languages and for different year groups are of variable quality. Their use as a planning tool is limited; they do not, for example, define more challenging objectives for the most able.
- The department has a good record of extra-curricular activities; in particular, older students appreciate the way that visits to France have improved their knowledge of the language and their attitudes to the subject.

Leadership and management of modern languages

Leadership and management are satisfactory.

- The subject is well supported by senior management, for example by funding small teaching groups in order to provide two different languages and to establish a course in the sixth form.
- Managers have a good knowledge of the department's strengths and weaknesses. However, little action has been planned to tackle some of the most pressing issues.
- No progress has been made in developing links in the subject with partner primary schools.

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

The school has not set a benchmark or prepared a plan to improve take-up in Key Stage 4. After a slow but steady improvement to 22%, numbers collapsed this year to 13%.

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

This is satisfactory.

- Most of the teachers use the interactive white board effectively to demonstrate and practise what they want the students to learn.
- The department has listed some useful activities in its planning documents, but the extent to which these are used varies between classes.
- Students at Key Stage 4 use ICT to reinforce vocabulary and structures and for some independent research. This helps them to make progress and to stay motivated.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- making the content and the activities of lessons in Key Stage 3 more interesting
- setting more challenging work for the most able students
- improving the accuracy and usefulness of assessment.

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

Yours sincerely

Derek Neil
Her Majesty's Inspector