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Dear Mrs Howells

Ofsted survey inspection programme - art and design

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 4 and 5 February 2009 to look at work in art and design.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on how well students 'learn to think and act as artists, craftspeople and designers, working creatively and intelligently' and 'develop an appreciation of art, craft and design, and its role in the creative and cultural industries that enrich their lives'. 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 pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of a sample of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of art and design was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are good.

- From average starting points the students make good progress in the first three years and achieve above the standard usually seen by the end of Year 9. They greatly enjoy their learning so that behaviour in lessons is usually good and often excellent.
- The subject is a popular choice in Years 10 and 11 for both boys and girls. The students do well in comparison to their starting points and reach overall standards above national averages in GCSE examinations although the girls outperform the boys.
- The students make good progress in handling materials and exploring processes. They develop good research skills, making effective use of sketchbooks and establishing good routines such as annotating work.

- Responses to projects become increasingly ambitious and innovative, particularly among GCSE students. The opportunity to develop a personal direction underpins their enjoyment of the subject at this level. While many manage this well, some find it difficult to refine their work and bring it to a successful conclusion because they are unclear about what they are trying to achieve. This makes it difficult for them to judge how well it is going or what to do next and is a factor affecting boys more than girls leading to their slower overall progress.

Quality of teaching and learning in art and design

Teaching and learning in art and design are good.

- The teachers have high expectations, good subject knowledge and are enthusiastic. Their class management skills are strong and lessons include varied activities so students can learn in different ways.
- Relationships with students are very good enabling good dialogue about work. Students appreciate the time given by teachers for example in the after-school club and in preparing their teaching.
- Lessons are largely well planned to meet students' needs. GCSE teaching is effective due to the individualised help given to students. However in some lessons, notably in Years 7 to 9 where there is greater reliance on whole-class teaching, some teaching strategies or tasks are not adapted well enough to meet students' varying needs.
- The assessment of students' long-term progress at GCSE is good and intervention is effective if there are concerns. The situation is less developed for younger students whose attainment is regularly checked but not systematically assessed against a long-term target.
- Marking in sketchbooks is regular and of high quality. Students have good opportunities to assess their own work and that of their peers.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum in art and design is good.

- The students respond well to the curriculum which is adapted carefully to match their interests and to offer good progression in learning.
- The first three years establish a good basis of skills in two- and three-dimensional work. The students systematically explore formal visual elements such as tone and colour and become confident using these to work from imaginative and observational starting points.
- A good breadth of experience is offered and good steps taken to develop it further. For example photography GCSE was added last year and computers installed both for the photographers and to generally ensure more access to digital image manipulation and on-line research.
- Fine-art and design-based activities constitute the majority of students' experiences and while the students encounter some craft materials they do not have enough opportunities to explore craft as a discipline.
- Good use is made of galleries and places of interest, including those found locally. The department does well in broadening students' awareness of how this kind of resource can support their work.

Leadership and management of art and design

The leadership and management of art and design are good.

- The subject leader shows great commitment to the students. She works well with her colleagues to develop the subject, looking outside the school to local and national networks to support what it does.
- There is a good track record of success in improving the curriculum and in boosting students' achievement and students respond well to what the subject has to offer.
- Monitoring is good and is based on scrutiny of work and analysis of assessment information, albeit in more depth at GCSE level than in Years 7 to 9. The subject leader has an accurate view of what needs to be improved as reflected in the subject development plan although it isn't always clear how the impact of actions will be checked.
- Staff and resource development are linked well to subject priorities, evident for example in the addition of GCSE photography.

Subject issue: the extent to which students 'learn to think and act as artists, craftspeople and designers, working creatively and intelligently' and 'develop an appreciation of art, craft and design, and its role in the creative and cultural industries that enrich their lives' is judged to be satisfactory.

- The curriculum exposes students to the work of a good range of creative practitioners, both male and female, from different times and places. Teachers plan these references well to link with projects.
- The students' understanding of the ideas central to the work of those they study is satisfactory although some need better analytical skills to investigate the work. This hinders these students in using what they learn to support their own creativity, restricting them to working 'in the style of' other practitioners rather than being informed more deeply by them. This is not always the case, however, and some work shows intelligent application of the influence of other creative practitioners.
- The students have a good understanding of some approaches typical of creative practitioners such as exploration and risk taking. However they do not have regular opportunities to work directly with them so they can see the creative process at first hand or find out about the influences on their work or how they make a living.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensure teaching and tasks are adapted so that students, especially boys, understand the characteristics of successful work so they are better able to develop and refine what they are doing
- broaden the curriculum so that students experience more craft activities and are able to work directly with creative practitioners
- improve the extent to which the students apply what they learn from other creative practitioners in developing their own creativity.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop art and design 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.

Ofsted gathers information on the immediate and longer-term impact of survey inspections, both on the institutions themselves, and with a view to improving its own processes. To this end, I should be grateful if you would complete the attached questionnaire and return it within the next ten days. We have also just sent a copy of the questionnaire by email. Please return your completed questionnaire to either the email or postal address on the form, not to me. We may also contact some schools by telephone after several months in order for us to gain a picture of longer-term impact. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Long
Her Majesty's Inspector