

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

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



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Ms Forster
Headteacher
Trinity School
Love Lane
Shaw
Newbury
Berkshire
RG14 2DU

Dear Ms Forster

Ofsted survey inspection programme – history

Thank you for your hospitality and co operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 14 and 15 January 2009 to look at work in history.

As outlined in our initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subjects, the visit had a particular focus on information and communication technology (ICT) in history and provision for gifted 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 data and documentation, an analysis of pupils' work and the observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards vary between the key stages. At Key Stages 3 and 4 achievement is good and standards are average. In the sixth form achievement is outstanding and standards are above average.

- Students are acquiring high levels of knowledge and an ability to deploy skills effectively.
- Three good examples of students' progress in history were observed during the inspection. In Key Stage 3, they learnt much about the Jews through the interpretation of evidence from the Holocaust and the study of recent events in the Middle East; in Key Stage 4, their positive response to targets set after a test was impressive; and in Year 12,

students' intellectual 'struggle' when interpreting sources on the last Tsar was notable. In addition, they made real gains in their time management.

- The subject makes an excellent contribution to pupils' personal development. Students enter the school often lacking in self-confidence and with weaknesses in basic skills. The history department works hard to overcome these problems, greatly improving students' knowledge and understanding of the human condition, their ability to communicate effectively and their willingness to take on challenges.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is judged to be outstanding.

- Teachers know the subject very well. The quality of their planning is exceptional in terms of the strategies employed to meet the wide range of students' needs. A good example of this is the use of 'mind-mapping'. In Year 13, students used these maps to identify factual information and from this identify overall trends and concepts.
- The use of assessment is outstanding. It is used very effectively to target work for students. In addition, students have a very clear understanding of what they have to do to improve. In many ways, this use of assessment information is the critical element behind the success of the department. It ensures that students succeed as well as they do.
- Students' attitudes to the subject are excellent. They enjoy the diversity of approaches to teaching and the opportunities to participate and take their own initiatives. Students interviewed were particularly appreciative of the support given by teachers, such as their willingness to provide extra help in after-school tutorials.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is judged to be good.

- The curriculum is well constructed. The department has responded positively to the possibilities offered by the new arrangements at Key Stage 3; for example, linking events of the past with the present and establishing overarching questions to organise discrete historical events. A good example of this is the exploration of the nature of conflict.
- The Year 7 curriculum is particularly successful in establishing themes which encourage links with other subjects, notably geography and religious education, art, English and citizenship.
- The possibilities offered by the new GCSE and A-level specifications have been exploited well; for example, the link that exists between the history of civil rights and life in contemporary multi-cultural Britain and the election of President Obama.
- These innovations are new. The head of history rightly acknowledges that there is still scope for further refinement to improve the relevance of what is taught for students in the school.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of history are judged to be outstanding.

- The joint leadership of the head of faculty and the head of history, with your support, provides vision and challenge as well as high expectations for staff and for students.
- Overall, the subject leaders have done well in addressing students' needs and in responding to teaching and curriculum opportunities. This has helped to ensure that students make at least good progress.
- Senior managers monitor very well. They also ensure that all staff play a full part in the management of the subject.

Subject issue: ICT

The use of ICT in history is good.

- ICT is predominantly used for students' research, word processing and presentations. Teachers say that they use it 'to bring the subject alive'. A good example seen during the inspection was the use of a news clip from Sky News; another example is an on-line trench simulation to help understanding of conditions during World War 1.
- An important feature of teaching is the careful preparation of students to use the internet selectively and to introduce them to some useful lesser-known websites. Students commented that this has helped them considerably with homework.
- The head of history is well aware of the potential for further development, in particular, the creation of a Virtual Learning Environment which will provide on-line resources and guidance for teachers and students in school and at home.

Subject issue: provision for gifted and talented history students

The provision for gifted history students is outstanding.

- In addition to the successful use by teachers of assessment data to help them adjust what is taught to meet the range of abilities, the setting arrangements ensure that gifted students are challenged in all respects. Good examples of this are the range of literature they use and appropriate extension activities, some of which are set for homework.
- Gifted students are given the opportunity to take GCSE humanities as a one year course in Year 9. The results are very successful with a high percentage of students achieving A* to C grades.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- continuing the development of over-arching themes to ensure the coherence and relevance of what is taught to students
- continuing the development of ICT in history, notably through the development of a Virtual Learning Environment.

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

Paul Armitage
Additional Inspector