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Dear Ms Curtis

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Planning for change: the impact of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 05 March 2009 to look at work in planning for and implementing the new Key Stage 3 curriculum with particular reference to Year 7.

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, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of the planning for and implementation of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Standards on entry to the present Year 7 are average. At this early stage of the implementation of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum, it is not possible to make a firm judgement on its impact on achievement but the progress of students in lessons and in their books is satisfactory.

- Students report they are learning new skills and are most enthusiastic about practical lessons which enable them to be independent, creative and work to their abilities such as design and technology, art and science.
- Students are well motivated and have good attitudes to learning. They enjoy school and take part in the many clubs and activities on offer.

Their behaviour is good, although a minority of students occasionally disrupt the learning of others in lessons.

- Work to develop students' personal, learning and thinking skills is at an early stage and its impact across the curriculum has yet to be felt. Good opportunities for students to develop collaborative and independent learning skills were observed in English.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in Year 7 is satisfactory.

- Relationships between students and teachers are good. Lessons are on the whole calm with students clearly focussing on their work. In some lessons students have good opportunities to learn in a variety of ways but some lessons are dominated by a single approach.
- In the best lessons teachers provide students with opportunities to work creatively and collaboratively which they enjoy considerably. Carefully structured assessment activities enable students to consider the strengths and weaknesses in their own and their peers' work.
- In the lessons observed, teachers did not always use assessment opportunities to check how well students had understood work and some did not direct the pace of learning well enough.
- Marking varies in frequency and in the guidance it provides to students in how to improve. Where teachers are providing students with helpful comments to improve their work it is not always clear that students act on them.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the new curriculum in Year 7 is satisfactory.

- Teachers have welcomed the opportunity to develop a more creative curriculum. The school's specialism in media and the arts has driven some of this work and helped to forge cross-curricular links, such as the mathematics and arts project.
- All subjects have reviewed their schemes of work and are developing new ones to take into account the changes in the new curriculum. This has been done thoughtfully, taking into consideration what has worked well in the past and what needs to improve.
- Good examples of personalising learning were seen in English. In this subject teachers consider the strengths and weaknesses of their students' knowledge in relation to the learning objectives of each lesson. This ensures that planning takes into account and caters for the needs of different students.
- Although good examples were seen, teachers' planning and schemes of work are inconsistent in how effectively they develop students' personal, learning and thinking skills.
- Students are positive about the support their teachers provide for them. However, the school does not offer additional after-school study support clubs to Year 7 students.

Leadership and management of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum

The leadership and management of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum is good.

- Senior leaders have taken a well thought out approach to developing the curriculum. This includes a staged approach to developing cross curricular links and embedding personal, thinking and learning skills. Innovative plans are in place to develop thematic learning through the use of specialist professionals such as architects and artists, linked to the schools specialism in media and the arts.
- Good systems have been set up to promote students' personal, learning and thinking skills. This includes a well designed model to cascade training to all teachers through the use of coaching. Although the impact of this is not fully evident in all Year 7 lessons because of the pragmatic approach taken to curriculum development, the impact has been good for Year 7 students with learning difficulties.
- Middle leaders are enthusiastic and committed. They are very well informed about the new curriculum and have taken a strategic approach to making changes in their subjects building on the good practice that already existed in their areas. They have maintained a focus on ensuring that students' learning experience from Years 7 to 11 is coherent.

Inclusion

The impact of the curriculum on inclusion is good.

- The Achievement group, where some vulnerable students are taught for a range of subjects, is a safe environment for them to engage in learning while not being totally isolated from the rest of their year group. In the lesson observed students made good progress and took part actively and enthusiastically. The focus on developing their skills, such as in organisation and speaking and listening, enables students to understand explicitly what contributes towards good learning. They report they enjoy learning in this group and are keen to share their successes.
- A well-thought-out range of transition programmes ensures smooth induction for students. These include good provision for students who are isolated in rural communities and additional induction days to ensure vulnerable students are prepared for starting school. Students' enthusiastic evaluation of the Reading Transition project is testament to their improved motivation and enjoyment of reading.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring rigour in monitoring and evaluating teaching and learning so all of it is as good as the best in school
- developing students' personal, learning and thinking skills across the curriculum
- implementing plans to enable greater cross-curricular collaborations.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop the curriculum 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

Asyia Kazmi
Her Majesty's Inspector