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Miss R Poppleton
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Dear Miss Poppleton

Ofsted survey inspection programme – history

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 11 and 12 March 2009 to look at work in history.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in history and on provision for gifted history pupils.

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 you, staff and pupils, a scrutiny of relevant documentation, an analysis of pupils' work and the observation of five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is good and standards are above average.

- Pupils make good progress and attain standards which are above average. Those in Year 9, for example, know about the impact of the railways in nineteenth century Britain and understand why urban areas grew rapidly. Pupils in Year 11 have developed their chronological understanding well. Most have a broad overview of how medicine changed over centuries and can relate this to improvements in public health. In the sixth form, students have good knowledge and understanding of life under the Tsars in Russia and know about the effects of the Treaty of Versailles after the First World War.

- At all ages, pupils are developing their historical skills well. They can evaluate primary and secondary sources competently and can make deductions from these. They can interpret sources well.
- History is a successful subject in the school and its results in the GCSE examination in 2008 were above national average, with 71% gaining grades A* to C. At AS level, 93% gained a pass grade and just over a quarter gained grades A to B, while at A level 95% passed with just over one third achieving grades A to B.
- Higher attaining pupils write well. Average and lower attaining pupils, however, do not write extensively or for different audiences and purposes. At all ages and abilities, pupils make basic mistakes in the use of grammar, spelling and punctuation.
- Pupils behave immaculately and their attitudes to learning are excellent. They work well with each other and with adults. At Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form, their independent study skills are well developed.

Quality of teaching and learning of history

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Teachers work hard and conscientiously plan their lessons. They know the needs of individual pupils and take these into account in their planning.
- Teachers have very good subject knowledge which is used well, especially in whole-class questioning, to extend pupils' knowledge and understanding. Pupils respond well to the brisk and often challenging questions, enabling them to extend and consolidate their learning.
- Lessons are characterised by excellent relationships. Teachers have appropriately high expectations of the pupils and constantly encourage them to do their best. Praise is used regularly. As a result, pupils value their history lessons and many stated how much they enjoyed studying the subject.
- Time is efficiently used and there is a regular reminder by teachers of how much is left for particular activities. Learning is well paced as a result.
- There is good oral feedback to the class and to individuals. Pupils value this feedback. The marking of pupils' work is regularly undertaken. Diagnostic comments are made and pupils are set targets on how to improve their work.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is good.

- The curriculum is broad, balanced and meets requirements.
- The department has revised its curriculum for Year 7 and plans are underway to introduce changes for Year 8 and Year 9 in September 2009. It is important that all requirements are fully met in this revision.
- At Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form, pupils follow a good range of studies for their examination requirements.

- The curriculum is enriched by visits to places of historical interest, for instance the Black Country Museum, Tamworth Castle and Shugborough Hall. In addition, visitors are invited to talk to pupils about, for example, the English Civil War and the Holocaust. Pupils said how much they enjoyed and valued such experiences.

Leadership and management of history

The leadership and management of history are good.

- The head of faculty and the relatively new acting head of history lead and manage the subject well. They have a clear view of how the subject needs to be developed in the future.
- This is because there are good procedures to monitor and evaluate provision. Detailed analysis of test and examination results is carried out. Pupils' progress is assiduously monitored and potential underachievers identified and given further support.
- Teaching and learning are regularly evaluated through a cycle of internal reviews. This includes the observation of lessons, scrutinising pupils' work and canvassing the views of pupils on how things can be improved.
- Pupils recognise that there is a distinctive ethos in the department based on the enthusiasm of the teachers and the setting of high expectations. The department benefits from good team spirit and high staff morale.

Subject issue: information and communication technology

The provision and use of ICT are satisfactory.

- The department benefits from one interactive whiteboard, which is used well.
- Pupils use ICT mainly for word processing. This is particularly true at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form. Other uses of ICT, for example in data handling, are limited.
- Pupils interrogate relevant websites on occasions but such work is limited. Many use ICT at home to support their learning in history.

Subject issue: gifted and talented history pupils

Provision for gifted history pupils is satisfactory.

- The department is aware of those pupils who are highly able in history. Their needs are met through the setting of extension activities in lessons and for homework. The department does not yet routinely set explicit targets in lessons for gifted pupils.
- Further work is planned in enhancing the provision for gifted pupils but this is at an embryonic stage.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that pupils, particularly the average and lower attainers, write more extensively, for different audiences and purposes, and that they use correct grammar, spelling and punctuation
- ensuring that pupils' skills in ICT are systematically developed in history.

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

Champak Chauhan
Her Majesty's Inspector