

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

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



11 March 2009

Mrs P Barron
Headteacher
St Bernard's High School and Arts College
Milton Road
Westcliff-on-Sea
Essex
SS0 7JS

Dear Mrs Barron

Ofsted survey inspection programme-history

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during the visit on 10 and 11 February 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 information and communication technology (ICT) in history and on provision for gifted and talented 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 documentation, an analysis of students' work and the observation of six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is good and standards are above average. However, achievement and standards vary between the key stages.

- At Key Stage 3 achievement is outstanding and standards are well above average. For example, students in Year 7 have an excellent understanding of the development of castles, whilst those in Year 9 can explain the range of causes which led to the First World War.
- At Key Stage 4 achievement is good and standards are average. Results at GCSE have fluctuated in recent years and have matched or exceeded the national averages. The department has analysed the

factors behind this variation and has put in place a series of timely measures to raise standards, especially at the highest grades.

- In the sixth form achievement is outstanding and standards are well above average. For example, students discuss and write fluently about the role of General Haig in the First World War and the changes affecting the working classes in Russia under Tsarist and Bolshevik rulers.
- Students' historical skills are well developed. Younger students know the difference between primary and secondary evidence and can evaluate sources well. Older students have a good grasp of interpretations and appreciate the broader skills history provides in helping people develop their ideas and beliefs.
- History makes an outstanding contribution to students' personal development. Students are enthused by the subject and they have a love of learning. Relationships are excellent and behaviour is exemplary. Students take a pride in their work, enjoy talking about what they have learned, and recognise the value of studying history. Such is students' enjoyment of history that it is one of the most popular optional subjects at GCSE.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Teachers are well qualified, have good subject knowledge and a clear understanding of examination requirements. The offer of support outside lessons, especially for examination classes, is much appreciated by the students.
- Lessons are well planned and good questioning strengthens learning. When given the opportunity, many students can articulate sound views, express thoughtful ideas and provide suitable evidence to support their opinions. Lessons have clear objectives which are shared with students. However, occasionally, insufficient time is left towards the end of lessons to check what has been learned and to ensure that objectives have been met.
- Teachers use a range of exercises and activities to help motivate students, including model making. Students say how much they enjoy these practical tasks.
- The needs of those students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities are planned for and well met. However, the needs of those who are higher attainers are only partially met because tasks do not always challenge them sufficiently.
- Teacher assessments are accurate and marking is generally effective. Books are marked, comments are made on the quality of work produced and praise is given when appropriate. The marking of work produced by GCSE and A level students is thorough. However, subject-specific guidance for students at Key Stage 3 on how to improve is variable.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is good.

- The current curriculum is broad and balanced and meets requirements.
- The department has started to revise the Key Stage 3 curriculum but plans are at an early stage. Teachers have yet to finalise how they intend to give appropriate time to all aspects of the revised programmes of study.
- The department has also started to plan the introduction of a new GCSE syllabus. This is because the current syllabus will no longer be available from September 2009. Students in Year 9, who have already decided that they would like to study history at GCSE, are looking forward to the new course.
- Cross-curricular links are strong. There are effective links to literacy and to citizenship, as well as to the school's specialist status subjects. For example, the department has recently developed fruitful links with science in looking at how scientists and historians approach the use of evidence.
- Students say how much they enjoy the external visits and listening to the visitors who come into school. These activities are integrated into students' work in the classroom and help to strengthen learning. For example, the Year 7 visit to Hadleigh Castle helps to illustrate the development of castle design, and the recent visiting theatre group production of 'Doomed Youth' focuses older students on the impact of the First World War.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of history are good.

- The department benefits from good leadership. The head of department is enthusiastic and well motivated. She works unflaggingly to organise the department and provide the materials and support needed by her colleagues who appreciate her commitment.
- The department runs well on a day-to-day basis. Historians benefit from teaching in adjacent rooms, work effectively as a team and share good practice through joint planning.
- Documentation is clear and well presented. Schemes of work and lesson plans are stored on the school's computer network and provide invaluable support for teachers.
- The department has a clear picture of its strengths and areas for improvement. Examination results are analysed and students' work is monitored. As a result, teachers are able to take appropriate action to support those students who require it.
- Action plans focus appropriately on students enjoying history and achieving their potential. However, there is insufficient emphasis upon meeting the needs of the most able students.

Subject issue: information and communication technology

The use of ICT in history is good.

- Teachers use interactive whiteboards effectively to enhance learning. Students enjoy their use, especially when they are given opportunities to use the technology themselves. They also appreciate how the use of video clips and PowerPoint presentations can bring a different perspective to their work.
- Students, especially those in examination classes, have the opportunity to produce work on computers and to undertake independent research on the internet. However, younger students do not have sufficient opportunities to use ICT in history. These opportunities are not taken partly because they are not identified within schemes of work.

Subject issue: provision for gifted and talented history students

The provision for gifted history students is satisfactory.

- Gifted history students are identified on a register and are known to individual teachers. However, schemes of work and lesson plans do not sufficiently identify activities and tasks for gifted history students and do not indicate clearly what is expected of them. As a result, opportunities to challenge these students to attain even higher standards are missed.
- Some extra-curricular activities are organised for gifted history students. For example, there is a special club for students in Year 8. However, provision outside lessons for gifted history students is limited.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- increasing the proportion of students achieving the highest grades at GCSE
- ensuring the curriculum at Key Stage 3 fully meets requirements
- identifying precise opportunities for developing students' ICT skills within the schemes of work
- ensuring that the needs of gifted history students are met more effectively.

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

Michael Maddison
Her Majesty's Inspector
Ofsted's Specialist Adviser for History