

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

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



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Mr I Veitch
Headteacher
Park View School
Church Chare
Chester le Street
County Durham
DH3 3QA

Dear Mr Veitch

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages (ML)

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and for the help of your staff and students, during my visit on 15-16 June 2009 to look at work in modern languages.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on how information and communication technology (ICT) is being used by teachers and students to improve language learning. It also looked at where you are in reaching the benchmarks for provision in Key Stage 4.

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 included: interviews with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation, including papers relating to the school's specialism as a languages college; analysis of students' work; and observation of five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of modern languages was judged to be good with outstanding features.

Achievement and standards

Standards are above average and achievement is good.

- The numbers entered for a modern language are extremely high. The proportions of each year group securing A*-C and A*-G grades are well above average. The percentage of those entered gaining an A*-C grade is

usually above average. The percentage with A*/A grades fluctuates and is sometimes below average. After a period of staffing difficulties, results in Spanish uncharacteristically fell to below average last year.

- Standards at the end of Key Stage 3 are also above average.
- Students perform at least as well in languages as in their other subjects. They make good progress in lessons.
- Students know a good range of strategies to help them understand reading and listening texts.
- In writing, they have a good understanding of what is needed to succeed in examinations. Many can produce a well crafted paragraph that contains elements of sophisticated language, such as different connectives and a range of tenses. Younger students get less opportunity to write at length.
- When students speak the foreign language their pronunciation, intonation and expression are poor, particularly when they rely on the written word for help. They find it difficult to construct their own sentences, for example by transferring expressions from one context to another.
- Students' personal development is very good. They understand the importance of learning a modern language, and, particularly in the upper school, enjoy the experience. They are aware of and are interested in the international work of the school. In class they behave impeccably; they pay attention, give of their best, and work very well, both individually and in collaboration with others.
- Some exercise books are untidy and marred by a plethora of photocopied vocabulary booklets and worksheets.

Quality of teaching and learning in modern languages

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Lessons are very well planned. They have explicit objectives that are constantly brought to the attention of the learners. Materials are prepared carefully to ensure the lessons run smoothly.
- Teachers have very good subject knowledge. Their language skills are outstanding. They have a sound understanding of examination requirements.
- Relationships are very good. The teachers use praise and encouragement effectively to motivate the students. In the best cases, they correct errors rigorously but sensitively.
- Work is challenging: the level of language used and the pace of the activities place high demands on the learners. At times the least able need to be helped more to understand the work.
- Lessons have a good variety of activities. The students particularly enjoy tasks that require them to be active and to use the language for a purpose.
- Marking and assessment are used to raise standards but the faculty is not entirely consistent in the way it does this. For example, the quality and frequency of the targets set for students vary between teachers. Staff do

not regularly make sure that the students make progress after they have had their work marked.

- Too often, the vocabulary and structures that would be most useful to the students are not prominent in the lesson plan, so the teaching does not give them enough emphasis.
- The students seldom get the opportunity to speak the language without using the written word for support.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding.

- The time allocated to modern languages and the organisation of the subject are very good. These factors make a significant contribution to the high standards. They also enable a high number of students to succeed in two languages, and some keen and able students to learn three.
- The impact of the specialism is very strong. It is evident in the subject's examination success and in the international dimension in the school's curriculum. It can be seen in the significant amount of international and languages display around the school; in the high numbers studying and enjoying the subject; and in the various school visits to different countries.
- The faculty is keen to experiment and adapt its curriculum in the light of experience. It has, for instance, successfully introduced a vocational alternative to GCSE for some students, and has used another national scheme to accredit students' achievement in the language they elect not to continue in Key Stage 4.
- The numbers studying a language in the sixth form are lower than the school would wish.

Leadership and management of modern languages

Leadership and management are good.

- Despite disruption in the staffing, the faculty achieves a very high level of consistency in its approach to planning, teaching, and trying out new ideas.
- Staff are well supported and their professional development is managed very effectively.
- The faculty knows its strengths and weaknesses very well. Its extremely thorough audit provides much food for thought when subject leaders decide their priorities for the coming year.
- The specialist college development plan contains very ambitious targets for students' attainment and some very imaginative ideas for extending the subject's reach across the rest of the curriculum.

How close the school is to reaching the benchmarks for language take-up in Key Stage 4

Take-up is very high because of the school's specialism. Almost 90% of students in Key Stage 4 learn a language, and over a third takes two languages. A small number learn three languages to GCSE level.

How well is ICT used by teachers and students to improve language learning?

This is good.

- The interactive whiteboard is used imaginatively to stimulate students' interest with a variety of well designed activities.
- Other uses of technology are appreciated by the students, for example making a video about their hobbies. Further uses are planned, such as a shared blog with a partner school in France.
- The school does not yet make much use of computers to set work that is designed for independent study and tailored to students' individual needs.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving students' ability to speak the language, in particular their pronunciation and confidence
- improving students' ability to manipulate the language so they can express themselves independently
- developing a virtual learning environment for students in order to promote more independent learning.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and local learning and skills council. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Derek Neil
Her Majesty's Inspector