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Mr N Beischer
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Dear Mr Beischer

Ofsted survey inspection programme – history

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during the visit on 06 and 07 May 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 contribution of history to community cohesion and the development of independent learning in history.

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 10 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be inadequate.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is inadequate and standards are well below average.

- The progress of some students is much better than this overall judgement. For example, the written work produced by some students on 'women and the vote' was of a high standard, as was some of the Year 11 coursework on Prohibition in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s.
- Overall, however, too many students at both key stages make insufficient progress. In 2008 at GCSE, for example, 28% of students gained A*-C grades and 88% gained A*-G grades. These results are well below the national average and, taking into consideration

students' prior attainment, they represent inadequate achievement. Steps have been taken to remedy this situation and forecasts for the current Year 11 suggest that more students are on track to achieve the higher grades.

- Students are developing a sound understanding of the topics studied. Some have good knowledge and, when given the opportunity, explain their ideas clearly and provide evidence to support their opinions. Students in Year 8, for example, spoke well about the implications of the abolition of slavery, while those in Year 10 had a clear grasp of what should happen to Germany at the end of the First World War.
- Teachers work hard to develop historical skills and students are well versed in how to evaluate sources, especially pictorial sources. Older students are beginning to acquire an understanding of significance in history, why historians have different interpretations of individuals and events, and why this is important.
- Students appreciate the broader skills history provides in preparation for future employment. They understand the importance of historical knowledge and how it helps us to understand current events. Year 11 students clearly recognise the skills learned from history, especially the importance of being able to analyse texts and select relevant information.
- History makes a satisfactory contribution to students' personal development. Students generally like history and, on the whole, enjoy lessons. Students work well on their own or in small groups. When motivated and engaged, they have positive attitudes to learning. However, when this is not the case, they become restless and learning is undermined.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is inadequate.

- Teachers are enthusiastic about the subject and are reflective about their work. They are keen for students to do well and those studying GCSE history feel particularly well supported in their work.
- Lessons are well planned and they have clear objectives which are shared with students. However, opportunities to reinforce learning are not always taken because insufficient time is left towards the end of lessons to consolidate and evaluate the learning.
- Lessons have a variety of exercises and students say how much they enjoy this variety. However, students are too passive in lessons and this leads to restless behaviour. Students want to have more interactive lessons and to do less copying out. Students also noted how little they used information and communication technology (ICT) in lessons and they wished they could use computers more regularly.
- Lessons have pace. However, some teachers are too eager to move on to the next activity. As a result, opportunities for students to think about what they are learning, to ask questions, to investigate for themselves, to discuss and debate the issues, and to reflect on what they have learned are not always taken.
- Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well supported and their needs are met. However, the needs of high attaining

students in history are only partially met because tasks do not always challenge them sufficiently.

- Marking is variable; books are marked and praise is given. In the best practice, guidance is given on how to improve in history and appropriate targets are set. However, overall marking is inconsistent and too many students, especially at Key Stage 3, receive insufficient subject-specific guidance.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is satisfactory.

- The curriculum at Key Stage 4 is satisfactory and students say they find the topics interesting. The department is reviewing the syllabus and is looking at changing examination boards to follow a course which it considers is more appropriate to students' needs and interests.
- The curriculum in the college at Key Stage 3 is in transition but it does not yet fully meet statutory requirements. The department has been slow to respond to the opportunities offered by the revision to the national programmes of study for Key Stage 3; for example, there is insufficient local history.
- Cross-curricular links are developing, especially at Key Stage 3. Through the study of the Holocaust, for example, strong links are made to citizenship. The highly successful Year 8 Slavery Project, which was led by the expressive arts' department, brought together teachers from several disciplines and students said how much they enjoyed this work. However, work in history to improve speaking and listening skills, as well as written communication, is underdeveloped.
- Students have benefited from visits in the past to places of historical interest, such as the Year 7 visit to Chester. However, enrichment activities through learning outside the classroom are limited; for example, there have been no out-of-classroom activities this year.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of history are inadequate, although management is better than leadership.

- The head of department, who is also head of humanities, is well intentioned and wants to see provision for history develop throughout the college.
- The department has faced considerable staffing issues and since January 2009 there have been three temporary teachers to cover maternity leave absences.
- The department is well resourced in textbooks and runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis. Teachers benefit from teaching in adjacent classrooms. However, systems for joint planning and the sharing of ideas and resources are underdeveloped.
- Schemes of work provide a general outline of what should be taught. However, they lack sufficient specific guidance for teachers on expectations for different groups of students and on opportunities to develop important skills. As a result, higher attaining students are not

always challenged sufficiently and opportunities for students to use ICT in lessons and to develop independent learning skills are missed.

- The department does not have a clear picture of its strengths and areas for improvement. Examination results at GCSE are analysed and students' work is scrutinised. As a result, individual teachers are able to take action to support students who require it. However, overall monitoring and evaluation are unsatisfactory. The department lacks a clear sense of direction and has no clear rationale to explain the curriculum at Key Stage 3. The current action plan lacks precision and the department is unable to identify what has been achieved in the last year.

Subject issue: the contribution of history to community cohesion

The contribution of history to community cohesion is satisfactory.

- Students have a satisfactory understanding of how places, people and events in the past impact on society today. Through the study of the Holocaust, slavery, and the struggle for civil rights in America, for example, the department teaches sensitive and controversial issues. However, the relevance of these topics to students' lives is not always made clear.
- Displays in classrooms and on corridors celebrate students' work. Relationships are positive and students noted that studying history helps you 'to respect people more'.
- References to community cohesion are not clearly highlighted in schemes of work. As a result, opportunities to make appropriate links are sometimes missed.

Subject issue: the development of independent learning in history

The development of independent learning in history is satisfactory.

- Teachers recognise the place of independent learning in history and the development of independent enquirers is often an aim of a lesson.
- Students undertake independent work in lessons and older students have a good grasp of enquiry skills. However, research exercises tend to be extension tasks in lessons or homework activities at Key Stage 3. Schemes of work do not include sufficient guidance on how and when independent learning skills should be developed. As a result, opportunities to improve students' independent learning skills are not always taken.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving achievement and standards at both key stages, especially at GCSE
- improving teaching and learning so that the needs of all students are fully met
- ensuring the curriculum at Key Stage 3 fully meets statutory requirements.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop history in the college.

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