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Mr A Jones
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Dear Mr Jones

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: History

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during the visit on 07 and 08 July 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 four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is satisfactory and standards are average

- In Key Stage 3, standards are above average and students' achievement is good. In Key Stage 4, standards in recent years have been below average. The achievement and standards of current students are far more promising, unmoderated coursework indicating standards and achievement that are at least satisfactory. In the sixth form, in 2008, students obtained grades in the range A to D and made at least satisfactory progress.

- Students' personal development is satisfactory. Through the topics covered their understanding of the human condition improves as does their understanding of how people develop different perspectives.
- Girls generally do better than boys but there is no obvious difference in achievement between students from different ethnic groups.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory.

- During the inspection, good, satisfactory and unsatisfactory lessons were seen. Teachers are knowledgeable and enthusiastic and they have a good relationship with students. Behaviour in classes is good. Students generally enjoy history.
- Lessons are a mixture of teachers talking and students undertaking activities. A weakness is that there is generally too much of the former and not enough of the latter. Students are not taking enough responsibility for their own learning – posing questions, deciding where to look to find the answers and then how best to communicate them. There are also weaknesses in the extent to which work is suitably differentiated to suit the needs of students.
- Students understand what they have to do to improve but targets are relative and they are unaware how well they are doing in relation to national standards.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is satisfactory.

- Staff have been revising the Key Stage 3 curriculum to meet the new National Curriculum although this process is not yet complete. In Year 7, for example, the department has chosen themes such as 'Movement, Settlement and Empires' focussing on the Romans, and 'Everyday Life' focussing on the Middle Ages. This represents a useful, developing approach to the curriculum.
- However, the themes selected do not cover historical knowledge and understanding that will help students comprehend the world in which they live now. In addition, there is not enough of a continuous narrative within a theme, linking the past to the present.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of history are satisfactory.

- The quality of self-evaluation is good. Strengths and weaknesses have been correctly identified.
- Strategies have been put in place to address the weaknesses although not all possibilities have been identified, or with sufficient clarity.
- There is enthusiasm for the subject amongst senior managers in the school who have provided effective, essential support to improve quality in the subject.

Subject issue: the contribution of history to community cohesion

The contribution of history to community cohesion is good.

- The cooperation between the students from different ethnic backgrounds in history lessons is outstanding.
- Different aspects of the curriculum contribute to a broad understanding of each other, for example, Black History week, but the current history curriculum is not explicitly constructed with the aim of contributing to community cohesion.

Subject issue: the development of independent learning in history

The development of independent learning in history is satisfactory.

- Students are given the opportunity to undertake activities in class, for example, researching, writing and performing a short piece of drama. However, significant independent learning, when students take a substantial initiative in class, has yet to be developed.
- To improve standards in Key Stage 4, the department has recently developed a detailed plan and set of actions including closer tracking of students' progress, involvement of parents and revision strategies. They are having a positive effect. However, the plan does not say enough about developing students' independent learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving achievement and standards by giving students more responsibility for their own learning
- developing the curriculum by making the themes more relevant to students by explaining the historical background to the present and by ensuring that they provide a continuous narrative.

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

Paul Armitage
Additional Inspector