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Dear Mr Watts

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages.

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and those of your staff and students, during my visit on 5-6 May 2009 to look at work in modern languages (ML).

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 made included: interviews with nominated staff, three groups of students scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of three full lessons and two part lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML was judged to be good and improving.

Context

The school has held language college status since 1999. The core languages of the school are French, Spanish and German.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is good; standards are average.

- The progress made by students in lessons observed was good overall, and in some it was outstanding.
- Standards at Key Stage 3 are well above average overall. Although the proportion of students attaining the expected National Curriculum Level 5 dipped from the preceding year, in 2008 some 71% of pupils achieved the expected Level 5 in French and 84% achieved this level in German. Results in Spanish were average, which reflects the shorter time students spend learning this language.
- Standards at Key Stage 4 are average. Very few students of the 2008 GCSE cohort entered the school having studied a modern language at primary school. In 2008, results at GCSE level in Spanish were above average, those in French broadly average and those in German well below average. Direct comparisons with national figures are difficult to make as much higher proportions of the cohort were entered for examinations in languages, especially for German, than is normally found in other schools. However, the school's targets were not met in 2008. Some past discontinuity in staffing, particularly in the German department, has had an adverse impact on results. The school's current assessments, however, indicate that standards are set to rise.
- The proportion of students attaining the highest grades at GCSE level was also above average in Spanish, average in French and well below average in German.
- A sizeable proportion of students continue to study languages in Key Stage 5 and the picture of performance in 2008 at 'A' and 'AS' level in Spanish, French and German was similar to that in Key Stage 4.
- A small number of pupils for whom English is an additional language are entered for 'AS' and 'A' level examinations in home and heritage languages and generally attain well.
- Overall, girls perform more strongly than boys.
- Students' skills in reading and writing are well developed as are their skills in listening which reflects the school's strong emphasis on these aspects. However, their skills in speaking are less well developed. Students' pronunciation is satisfactory and often good but many lack confidence in speaking.
- Students' enjoyment of learning languages is high. They cited the strong emphasis on information and communication technology (ICT) in lessons and opportunities to learn about the cultures of different countries. Consequently, ML makes a very good contribution to students' personal development and well-being.
- Students have a very good understanding of how languages can benefit their future study options and future work prospects. Examples cited by them of careers in languages included interpreting, translating, tourism, teaching, working abroad in business and commerce and with refugees.
- Students' intercultural understanding is very well developed. They could explain where the core languages of Spanish, French and German are spoken and older learners could explain that there were differences between the Spanish spoken in Spain and that spoken in

the countries of South America. They could also explain where other languages, such as Portuguese, are spoken in the world. They also cited the different foods, school arrangements, key tourist sights and customs that are found in countries where the languages they are studying are spoken. They could name popular festivals, such as the Munich Oktoberfest and the Fasching carnival.

Quality of teaching and learning in ML

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- The quality of teaching is good overall. Lessons observed ranged from satisfactory to outstanding.
- Lessons are well planned, logical and sequenced. Most work is appropriately matched to students' abilities, although in some lessons the most able students were not always fully challenged.
- Teachers' subject knowledge and pronunciation are good; sometimes very good. In most lessons, there was effective use of the target language by staff but in some, good opportunities to use it were missed.
- A good range of language learning strategies are used. In a Year 8 Spanish lesson, cognates were well used to help students learn new vocabulary about rooms in a house.
- A variety of activities and resources make language learning interesting. Textbooks and worksheets are of good quality and some games are used to reinforce learning. However, some sessions at the ends of lessons are not fully exploited to ensure that new learning is reinforced and embedded.
- There is a strong emphasis on grammar. In a very good German lesson of a more able Year 11 class, students were reminded to use complex constructions, such as 'um zu' in their writing and were required to draw on their grammatical knowledge to work out clues to words missing from a text.
- There is good, and sometimes outstanding, use of ICT in lessons.
- Students are well informed about the levels they are working at, their target grades and what they must do in order to improve their work.
- Most students are willing learners and are keen to answer questions from teachers. Work in their books is neatly presented.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding.

- Almost all students study a language to GCSE level. The school's core languages are German, Spanish and French. Students begin with one language in Year 7, and in Year 8 take up a second language and continue with both until the end of Year 9. This approach enables

students to make an informed choice about which language or languages they wish to study in Key Stage 4.

- The time allocated for learning languages is very good.
- Curriculum pathways are organised to enable students who wish to study two languages in Key Stage 4 to do so. Some 10% of learners in the current Year 10 have chosen to do so.
- Good provision is also made for students with English as an additional language to take examinations in their home and heritage languages. Where necessary, tutors are specifically employed by the school to provide appropriate tuition.
- The curriculum is greatly enriched by popular, longstanding student exchanges to schools in France and Germany and more recently to Spain. There are also several residential visits to German cities and one day visits to France.
- Further enrichment is provided by a Russian club and other regular 'drop in' clubs in each of the core languages where students can receive help with homework and other aspects of language learning.
- Year 12 students benefit from a three day language course during which they learn about a non-roman script language, such as Chinese, Greek or Russian.
- The school has piloted a number of alternative accreditation routes and currently is trialling an ASDAN course in French with a group of less able learners which is enabling them to make good progress.
- The use of the language centre's own computer suites is carefully timetabled to ensure that all classes have the opportunity to use ICT to improve their learning of languages.
- The library has a good range of books, novels and magazines for students to read. A number of foreign language on-line materials are subscribed to and students have access to these.
- Schemes of work are appropriate and have been drawn up by each language department and meet the interests of learners.
- The language centre and individual classrooms have many colourful and supportive displays, including much written work by students in the core languages.

Leadership and management of ML

Leadership and management are good.

- You and the governing body are very supportive of ML and have ensured that the ML departments are well resourced and staffed. You act as the senior management link with these departments. The school's self evaluation document and development plan accurately identify areas for development in ML.
- Subject leadership of the three core languages is good. Subject leaders analyse data and results and draw up subject development plans and departmental self evaluations. There is scope for the analysis of data to be more analytical about the performance of each subject.

- Lessons are monitored regularly and students' work is scrutinized, for example, to ensure that staff are complying with the departments' marking policies.
- Key areas of development designed to raise standards have been identified. An example of this was training for the German department on developing students' oral skills. There are indications that this targeted training is having a beneficial impact on standards. There is scope to ensure that such training is systematically shared with the other language departments.
- Leadership of the language college's outreach work is outstanding and has a major impact on language learning in the LA. The coordinator has developed good links with the school's main feeder primary schools and a member of staff teaches French in most of them. He has provided training for the LA in the use of ICT in ML and in developing the skills of a large number of primary school teachers. Web sites containing resources and ideas have been set up which are accessed by students and other schools. New methods of making languages more popular and their teaching more effective have been trialled. Very good links have been developed with the school's other specialist department, science, and a number of ideas developed by the language college have been adopted by it.

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

- The school exceeds the higher benchmark of 80% for language colleges recently set by the Secretary of State. Almost all students in Key Stage 4 study a language to GCSE level.

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

This is outstanding.

- Interactive whiteboards with attractive colourful presentations were routinely employed in all lessons observed to explain new vocabulary and concepts and to reinforce learning. In an outstanding lesson in a Year 13 class, students skilfully used a computer program to verbally record what they had written in French and then listened to each others' recording in order to evaluate it.
- All classes have good and regular opportunities to use the language centre's computer suites to improve language learning.
- The school has pioneered a number of innovative ways to improve language learning. These include the use of pod casts, a language college blog and a wiki system. The blog contains many ideas and resources on language teaching and receives about 150 hits per week, approximately half of which are from students and half of which are from other schools, including some from abroad. The wiki system

enables students to store their work online and staff to check and mark it. It also enables students to communicate rapidly with staff about language learning. The college has also begun to use a social networking service to remind students about coursework deadlines.

- Foreign language films are shown regularly to students to give them experience of native speaking and insight into different countries' history and culture.
- Videos and PowerPoint presentations are made by students to practise their speaking skills and are shown to their peers and younger pupils. Computerised sound recording programs are used, for example in the Sixth Form, to enable students to improve their speaking and listening skills.
- Students of all abilities are adept at using ICT in language lessons, including online dictionaries and spell checkers.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising standards at Key Stage 4, particularly in German
- improving teachers' use of the target language and students' opportunities for speaking
- ensuring the most able students are fully challenged in lessons
- ensuring plenary sessions are fully exploited to reinforce new 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

Michael McIlroy
Her Majesty's Inspector