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Dear Mr Thompson

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 7-8 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 staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Overall, achievement is good; standards are above average.

- Standards are mostly above average in both key stages and post 16.
- Students' general attainment on entry is just above average but few students enter with substantial experience of learning a ML, if any.
- In Key Stage 3, by the end of Year 9, many students reach standards consistently beyond national expectations.

- A substantial number of those who take GCSE attain A*-C grades, with very good numbers with A*-A in 2008 in French. Predictions for this year are well above average in German; broadly average in French with boys doing less well than girls.
- In lessons students achieved between satisfactory and good progress.
- In three lessons, progress was good because both planning and teaching were good and ensured that students reached the objectives of the lessons.
- In two lessons progress was hindered by over ambitious planning, which whilst challenging, did not support all students in achieving as much as they might.
- Scrutiny of work showed that reading and writing skills are often above average.
- Students spoken to enjoy learning a language and they are enthusiastic about their lessons which they describe as interactive.
- They say they do lots of speaking in different situations and speaking is well accounted for in feedback from examination boards.
- They are excited by the trips the school organises to France and Germany and the opportunities to speak whilst they are there.
- They know how valuable it is to learn a language and can cite different reasons for doing so including socio-economic ones.
- Overall, learning languages contributes well to their personal development and well-being.

Quality of teaching and learning in ML

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Teaching is mostly in the target language and so students have consistent role models. Students understand and react appropriately.
- Most students do not yet routinely use the target language themselves for day to day interaction although the department has made some attempt to put this into place and it is in the department policy document. It has not yet been given the emphasis it needs.
- Some examples of good practice in teaching were: high expectations; very good speaking, listening, reading and writing activities to practise and revise language; good use of resources including ICT and DVD; a judicious use of text books; good employment of the foreign language assistant (FLA).
- Learning support assistants are not always fully briefed to support as well as they might.
- Students say they know how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve and could cite examples of targets set. It is not evident from the work sample for Key Stage 3 that all staff set detailed and useful targets or use 'can do' sheets and homework task sheets to keep a track of students' coverage.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- French and German are provided throughout Key Stage 3 except for a class of students who study one language and extra English/literacy.
- Students have suitable time to study each language.
- Students' entitlement to learn a language in Key Stage 4 is met and there is a choice of two languages.
- The school encourages students who have a home language other than English to take an examination in it, or to take GCSE early if it is French or German.
- Overall, the programmes and activities planned meet the needs and interests of learners, promote creativity and contribute to enjoyment of learning a ML. Schemes of work are detailed and helpful for all phases and the French schemes for Key Stage 3 clearly take account of the latest National Curriculum and highlight such things as thinking skills. The German scheme has a good section at the beginning of the autumn term devoted to learning a language for life as a useful skill.
- Students use ICT regularly to practise different skills. They find this motivating. It also enables them, for example, to work at their own pace; to work more independently on revision and homework; to be in contact with pen friends abroad by email; and to research the culture of the two languages.
- The more recent Year 7/8 'homework tasks' are an excellent way of developing more independent work associated with the 'new' curriculum alternating between research, enhancing cultural awareness, and revision, with some very good results.
- There is a trip to France and one to Germany and an exchange with Germany. Numbers wishing to go are high and students express enjoyment on returning. Wall display, as well as discussion with students, shows that students' cultural awareness has been much enhanced.
- The school manages to fund a FLA and alternates the language each year, except in the last two years where a strategic decision was taken to have a second German FLA to improve results. This has been a successful strategy.
- The whole school celebrates the European Day of Languages.
- Year 8 enrichment day each year is devoted to languages with tasters of different languages and celebration of languages spoken by others in school.

Leadership and management of ML

Leadership and management are good.

- The senior leadership is very supportive and more recent line management has improved the direction and outcomes of the department substantially.
- In order to promote languages and support the few students who wished to continue post-16, the school has more recently allowed classes of very small numbers to continue. For 2009/10 there is an excellent increase in the numbers of students taking up a language in Year 12, from 3 to 15.
- Departmental self-evaluation is very good demonstrating knowledge of strengths and weaknesses and the departmental development plan is detailed, well-linked to the school's priorities and a good instrument for improvement in ML, although it does not refer explicitly to improving take-up in Key Stage 4. The latter is also lacking in whole-school documentation.
- Overall, there is good monitoring by both senior leadership and the head of department (HoD) to ensure that areas to improve are constantly on the department's agenda.
- Continuing professional development is appropriate to meet the priorities and needs identified.
- The HoD is developing further links with primary schools and has proposed providing activities for Years 5 and 6 on site. She is also very aware that Year 7 schemes of work will need editing as it becomes clearer what the majority of primary schools in the area are doing with regards to primary languages.

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

This is inadequate.

- The school's entry for GCSE in Key Stage 4 in 2008 was well below the national average. Numbers dipped further in take-up in Year 10 in 2008/09. Take-up for 2009/10 has improved slightly but remains well below the national average.
- The department has looked to improve the situation through introducing more trips abroad, having an external speaker to discuss the benefits of language learning and generally trying to make learning more attractive in Key Stage 3 with more active work and the use of ICT.
- Overall, students achieve above national expectations by the end of Key Stage 3. The school puts low take-up down partly to its three specialisms and the demands they make.

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

This is good.

- ICT is very well led within the department, with vision, enthusiasm and thoughtfulness.
- The department has its own bank of up to date computers within the department. These are positioned so that work can also be carried out in the centre of the classroom. Each classroom has its own whiteboard and projection and wireless mice have been introduced for students to use the interactive whiteboard from their seats.
- There is a very good range of software to support language learning at different phases. Quite a lot of software supports revision and work at home.
- The department and students also make use of generic software. The department is developing its own resources in its shared area, for example: challenging texts; recordings; games and songs.
- All students and staff have email addresses and sending work for marking is beginning.
- The learning portal is just being developed and languages are leading the way.
- There is regular use of computers to enhance language learning during curriculum time: each class goes into the computer room once a fortnight.
- Students are aware of how to get accents and some disadvantages of translators.
- Students said how useful it was to be able to choose software to work with to improve their different skills. In one half lesson, Year 11 students, shortly to take their GCSE, were given the independence to choose from a range of resources to work on different skills that most needed improving. Between them they were working on listening, reading and writing skills, and two lower attaining boys were improving their vocabulary. Students said this was really useful to be able to do this and they would be able to continue at home.
- In another lesson some Year 9 students enjoyed responding to their pen-friends on the topic of favourite food, which they had just revised in the lesson; a very good way to put it into a more authentic context.
- As yet, the impact of using ICT on enhancing language learning has not been formally evaluated.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- planning and teaching students to be able to use the languages for routine conversation and requests in lessons
- improving inconsistencies in target setting, especially in Key Stage 3, so that it is always useful and consistent across the department
- rapidly improving the take-up in Key Stage 4.

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

Pam Haezewindt
Her Majesty's Inspector
Specialist Adviser for Languages