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Mr N O'Connor
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Dear Mr O'Connor

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 1-2 July 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 five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML was judged to be satisfactory with some good features.

Achievement and standards

Standards are average. Achievement is good.

- Standards at the end of Key Stage 3 are in line with national expectations.
- Students of minority ethnic heritage performed better than other students in 2008. Girls performed more strongly than boys, although

the most recent assessments for 2009 indicate that the position is reversed.

- In 2008, no students formally studied languages to GCSE level in the modern languages department. Under the guidance of another faculty, a small number of students did take exams at this level in their home and heritage languages and most achieved well. Inspection evidence and school data suggest that standards for students currently studying languages in Key Stage 4 are average.
- The progress made by students in lessons observed was mostly good.
- Students' skills in reading and writing are developing well. Their speaking skills are less well developed. Students in Key Stage 3 often lack confidence when speaking but older students are more confident.
- Students' intercultural understanding is underdeveloped.
- Students' understanding of the usefulness of languages for their future economic well-being is satisfactory.
- Learning languages generally makes a satisfactory contribution to students' personal development and well-being. Students behaved well in class. The majority of younger students enjoy learning a language. However, a number of older students who had not chosen to continue with a language in Key Stage 4 stated that they had found learning a language difficult, some activities unexciting, and had been unsure at times of what was expected of them.

Quality of teaching and learning in ML

The quality of teaching and learning is good overall.

- Teachers' subject knowledge is good and they make good use of the target language in lessons.
- In some lessons, there were appropriate checks to ensure that students understood their tasks, although in others some students were unclear of what they had to do.
- Planning is generally good and is logical and sequential. It identifies clearly 'starter' activities in lessons that suitably reinforce previous learning. There are good opportunities for listening, reading and writing.
- Opportunities for speaking are less well developed. Students have limited opportunities to practise speaking with each other where they can become used to manipulating the language and develop confidence in its use. Teachers often accept one word answers to their questions and opportunities for students to practise new language are missed.
- Language learning strategies are well used to develop students' understanding and recall of new vocabulary. For example, in a good Year 10 Spanish lesson, students were encouraged to draw on both their knowledge of English and French cognates to decode the meaning of vocabulary about parts of the body.

- Marking is good overall although there is some variability in its quality across the department. At its best, students' work is corrected well, the levels they are working at are frequently recorded in their books and concise guidance for improvement is given. Most students know the National Curriculum levels that are working at and what they need to do to improve.
- Homework is regularly set and reinforces learning well.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- All students in Key Stage 3 study French and none is withdrawn from lessons for other work. Currently, students in Year 10 study Spanish and those in Year 11 studied French. Both French and Spanish are offered as options at Key Stage 4. However, no student has opted for either in the coming academic year.
- Activities in lessons generally meet the interests of learners. Commercial schemes of work are used in French and Spanish and adapted where necessary to meet the needs of learners. Useful links with the school's specialism in sports have been identified.
- The time allocated for learning languages is suitable.
- Students who already speak a language other than English have the opportunity to be entered for examinations at GCSE level through the auspices of another department. There is scope for the modern languages department to celebrate and make greater use of these students' language skills.
- Useful and colourful displays about key aspects of languages in the ML department support learning. A number feature students' work and others focus on the different careers to which the study of languages can lead.
- There are some French language books in the school library to support language learning but students make little use of these. There are few other foreign language reading materials, such as newspapers, magazines or comics that students can browse for pleasure.
- A homework club is held for students studying towards GCSE examinations. In the past, the curriculum has been enriched by some visits to a local university and a languages centre. Currently, there are no extra-curricular clubs, visitors or activities that would enrich the curriculum and stimulate students' interest in languages.

Leadership and management of ML

Leadership and management are satisfactory.

- You are supportive of ML and keen to see that the take-up of languages improves in Key Stage 4. However, ML does not feature in the current school improvement plan.

- The subject leader provides sound leadership for the faculty of languages and is committed to raising standards. Following some past discontinuity in staffing, she has appropriately focused on improvements in teaching and learning and on the reintroduction of languages into Key Stage 4. Recently, the subject leader has become more involved in the regular monitoring of teaching and learning in the subject.
- Self-evaluation of the department's effectiveness is satisfactory. Data is used to analyse results and the progress that students make. Planning and students' work are scrutinised. There is scope to analyse the performance of the faculty and students' performance data and views in greater detail so that the faculty has a clearer overview of its performance.
- The faculty's action plan is satisfactory and focuses mainly on improving teaching and learning. It would benefit from more regular review. The school does not currently have a developmental plan which sets out clear strategies for increasing the low uptake of languages at Key Stage 4. The subject leader has examined the feasibility of changing the main language taught in order to improve the uptake of languages and there are plans to look at alternative accreditation for ML.
- Some links have been established with local primary schools but links with other providers, such a local languages college are at an early stage of development.

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

- The school is well below the benchmark set by the Secretary of State of 50% of students studying a language in Key Stage 4. The school moved from a position where no students formally studied languages to GCSE level in 2008 to one where a language is currently studied in both Year 10 and Year 11. In the current Year 10, some 9% of students are studying a language.
- Although entitlement is met with language options, no pupil has opted to study a language in the forthcoming Year 10, partly because of clashes with other options.

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

This is satisfactory.

- ICT is used by teachers for data analysis and checking on students' progress.
- Teachers use interactive whiteboards in lessons satisfactorily in lessons to introduce new learning and to help students practise their skills. Resources used are mainly those linked to the scheme of work.

- Students have few opportunities to use ICT independently to develop their language skills, such as drafting and redrafting written work for accuracy, or researching the Internet to develop reading skills and an understanding of other cultures.
- There are plans to enable younger students to use the school website to access suitable reinforcement materials that have been recently purchased.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- drawing up a faculty developmental plan in which strategies can be set out that will enrich the curriculum, extend the range of activities in ML and raise and sustain the uptake of languages at Key Stage 4
- developing opportunities for students to use ICT independently in languages
- creating more opportunities for students to practise and improve their speaking skills
- broadening students' intercultural understanding.

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

Yours sincerely

Michael McIlroy
Her Majesty's Inspector