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Ms A Magill
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Magill

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 28 and 29 September 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 take up in Key Stage 4, and the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to improve language learning.

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 10 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement in languages

Achievement and standards are outstanding.

- Attainment in all languages is exceptionally high and there is no difference between the achievement of boys and girls. Progress is outstanding.
- Standards in GCSE examinations continue to rise. Almost every student gained at least one GCSE pass at grade C or above in a language.

- In the sixth form, attainment is above average. This represents outstanding progress from students' starting points. Numbers are still low, but many go on to follow a higher education course in languages.
- Progress in the lessons observed was at least good and occasionally better.
- Students are confident speakers and cope with ease when listening either to recordings or to their teachers. They read well and the quality of their writing is above average.
- Students enjoy languages, behave well and have excellent attitudes.
- Language study contributes significantly to students' confidence and self-esteem. They develop an excellent appreciation of other cultures and of diversity.

Quality of teaching of languages

The quality of teaching and learning is good overall and sometimes better.

- Consistently good teaching and a common approach across all languages enable students to adapt easily when moving from one language to another.
- Teachers have excellent subject knowledge and use the language being studied almost exclusively during lessons. However, the use by students when talking to each other is less well developed.
- Lessons include a wide range of activities with objectives graded for different abilities. Games and fun activities enhance the students' enjoyment. Sometimes teachers fail to adjust their teaching as the lesson proceeds and the pace of learning declines. Students are then passive for too long.
- Students with particular needs are supported exceptionally well. As a result, progress is equally good for all groups.
- There are regular opportunities for students to be involved in creative projects, many of which make use of technology to increase enjoyment.

Quality of the curriculum in languages

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding.

- There is a wide range of languages available. Almost all students study two languages in Key Stage 3 and continue with at least one in Key Stage 4.
- The curriculum is flexible, to meet individual needs and preferences. Students with a home or heritage language are supported to develop this.
- The department successfully builds on the work done in the primary schools.
- There is a wealth of extra-curricular and enrichment opportunities which are well supported.

- Students have good access to text books but there is a limited range of other reading material such as magazines. Students would appreciate more opportunities to read for pleasure.
- There is a generous allowance of time devoted to languages, and in the sixth form students benefit from being taught in small groups.
- Special projects organised through the specialist status contribute significantly to the enjoyment of languages and to the opportunities to gain self-confidence and work-related skills.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in languages

Leadership and management are outstanding.

- All staff share a clear, common vision for the direction of the department.
- Ambitious targets are increasingly met and excellent leadership at all levels is successfully driving up the quality of teaching.
- Effective self-evaluation ensures priorities, linked well to the main school priorities, are effectively bringing about improvements.
- Any weaknesses in teaching are tackled with both support and challenge.
- Governors participate in foreign visits and exchanges.
- The department makes very good use of the accommodation, especially the ICT suite. Rooms are rather small, but well resourced, and displays support and enhance learning well.
- The specialist status makes a significant contribution to the success of the department and to improving provision in the local area.

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

The school's take-up in Key Stage 4 is well above the national average. Take-up in Year 10 is 100%.

How well ICT is used to improve language learning

This is excellent.

- All teachers use interactive whiteboards very effectively in lessons to engage students and improve their learning.
- Students confidently use language sites and other areas of the internet to develop their research and reading skills. They use a wide range of language software, including structured and demanding exercises to improve reading and writing for students with home languages.
- The departmental website enables staff to share resources.
- New technologies are embraced and email links with schools abroad are used to bring languages to life.

- Internet resources bring authentic resources into the classroom.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring teachers check the progress of all students during lessons so that the pace of learning remains high for all
- developing strategies to enable students to use the target language in their interactions with each other.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop modern languages 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

Elaine Taylor
Her Majesty's Inspector