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Mr J Murray
Principal
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Dear Mr Murray

Ofsted survey inspection programme – art, craft and design

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 29 and 30 September 2009 to look at work in art, craft and design.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on how effectively students learn to draw with confidence and creativity.

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 included interviews with you, the subject leader, students in Key Stages 3 and 4, and in the sixth form; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of art, craft and design is satisfactory.

Achievement in art, craft and design

Achievement in art, craft and design is satisfactory, with good features.

- In Years 7 to 9, students make satisfactory progress in the subject. Students develop skills, knowledge and understanding similar to those achieved nationally. However, their portrait work in Year 8 is good because they effectively combine their interpretation of the work of other artists with their observational and drawing skills.

- The proportion of students choosing to take an examination in the subject has been below average but has increased with the introduction of BTEC alongside the established GCSE Fine Art course. Overall, GCSE results are satisfactory, but better for girls. An improving trend in students' performance in Fine Art led to an above average proportion of the higher grades in 2009. Work is often well composed and crafted. Use of colour and abstraction from observation are common strengths.
- In the sixth form, students make satisfactory progress overall in relation to their starting points. However, good attainment is evident where students express personal insights and feelings evocatively through in-depth use of media or subject matter. Their engagement with contemporary practice is variable but often underpins the best work. Students who have linked work to their other subjects, such as psychology, or passions such as dance have achieved striking work.
- In all years, students use two-dimensional media with more confidence, creativity and control than is seen in their use of three-dimensional or digital media. Student interviews revealed an early perception that high attainment in the subject is dependant upon traditional drawing and painting skills. While these important skills are taught well, the baseline test does little to reassure students that other skills are of equal value.
- Students who choose to take the subject to examination level generally enjoy their experience and the most successful show a high level of commitment through their preparation and follow-up to lessons. However, not all students, particularly boys, convert early enthusiasm into later success in examinations. Few students had visited an art gallery independently despite very positive attitudes in lessons.

Quality of teaching of art, craft and design

The quality of teaching of art, craft and design is satisfactory.

- Teachers share their enthusiasm for their subject well but not all exploit their unique specialisms, such as textile design. When students are given opportunities to see the artist in the teacher, through demonstration or by sharing their own work, they are inspired. Students who had worked with a visiting artist valued the opportunity to learn an unfamiliar skill and about life as a creative practitioner.
- A consistent strength of teaching is the emphasis on developing specialist vocabulary. The 'word wall' in each art room contains an extensive range of words to explore and apply, although they were not actively used in the lessons observed. Nevertheless, the guidance given to students through discussion and written information is clear.
- Lesson planning is adequate in meeting the needs of most students. However, some classes had worked with the teacher in previous years, creating opportunities for more differentiated starting points. Lesson planning successfully identifies the teaching and learning styles used with the class but not which strategies are designed to engage different

students. The use of work reviews to enable students to learn from their peers is managed sensitively to motivate different learners.

- Teachers are keen to ensure that students are clear about what is expected of them. Nevertheless, long lesson introductions sometimes limit opportunities for students to develop initiative and demonstrate their independence, for example in managing resources, including time. Students interviewed had welcomed a mock examination as an opportunity to take responsibility and sustain interest over an extended period of time but would have valued the opportunity earlier.
- Three-part lessons are established. The lessons observed followed a sound but predictable pattern starting with exposition by the teacher and concluding with a review of work. However, in one lesson the teacher enthusiastically experimented with 'lesson reporters' to record and summarise key points. Teachers could more often exploit their own ability to think creatively to invent more varied approaches, including drawing on students' active and practical participation from the start.
- Teacher assessment is conscientious. The dialogue between students and teachers is well-informed and constructive. Some sketchbooks also contain specific teacher comments that skilfully identify a strength and advice about how to develop a weaker area. Self and peer evaluation also informs students' understanding about how to improve their work. However, the department should review the frequency, form and focus of assessment grades to avoid the disillusionment expressed by some Year 7 students.

Quality of the curriculum in art, craft and design

The quality of the curriculum in art, craft and design is satisfactory.

- 'Fine art' skills and related understanding about artists are planned well. These aspects of the curriculum promote students' progression in drawing and painting and, for most students taking an examination in the subject, remain their most secure form of expression. Three-dimensional media are used less frequently. Students develop much less confidence in exploring structure, surface or form, or knowledge and understanding about craftspeople or designers.
- The school recognises that the fine art curriculum does not meet the needs, interests or aspirations of all students. 'Applied' and now BTEC options provide a more inclusive subject curriculum but the success of these courses in making the curriculum more relevant for more students is not yet proven. In Key Stage 3, more projects require a practical as well as an aesthetic purpose to better prepare students.
- There are insufficient links with art galleries and museums. Some students are able to reflect on visits experienced with their families, but not all have had such opportunities or know how to take advantage of the rich cultural opportunities nearby. A structured visit to London galleries is provided for students in the sixth form.

- The curriculum has enabled a small proportion of students to work with a visiting artist but the use of artists in residence is not embedded or linked to specific course objectives. Some students interviewed recalled positive experiences of working with artists in primary school.
- Students are introduced to a satisfactory range of subject matter. 'Natural forms' is a theme frequently re-visited. The 'built environment' is under-used to inspire students. 'Identity' captures students' interest in Key Stage 3 and in the sixth form. Discussion in lessons indicates that students develop strong personal views about their world which could be expressed earlier through the subject.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in art, craft and design

The effectiveness of leadership and management in art, craft and design is satisfactory.

- The subject leader has prioritised effectively, improving students' achievement in examinations following a previous decline. The clear impact of provision on students' outcomes in the 'fine art' option demonstrates capacity to improve further.
- Self-evaluation is used effectively to identify strengths and tackle weaknesses. While more could be made of external links with the subject community to inform future direction, senior leaders and the subject specialist in the local authority both support and challenge.
- Improvement planning is clearly informed by subject and whole-school self-evaluation. Students' views are collected but could be used more systematically as a measure of success.
- The school's specialist technology status has some impact on subject provision. Staff are beginning to use computer technology as a stimulus for lessons. The school's plasma screens are used to project images of students' work. However, too few students exploit the creative potential of computers as an integral part of their art making.
- Work displayed by all years in the art rooms and public areas of school sends a clear message to students that every stage in their art education counts. Display is used professionally across the school to celebrate and promote achievement. The subject area could contribute more by, selecting and presenting images and text to engage students and enable students and staff not directly involved to learn from their working processes, experiences and feelings.

Subject issue: How effectively do students develop their confidence and creativity through drawing?

This is good.

- From the start, the importance of drawing as a key skill in the subject is emphasised. For example, the Key Stage 3 homework book provides clear guidance about a range of activities for students to follow. The Year 7

baseline test, designed by the department, also emphasises the importance of recording from observation. These strategies provide a secure basis for the addition of more open-ended tasks to promote students' mark-making and experimentation with drawing media.

- While not explicitly linked through cross-curricular planning, complementary approaches are used in graphics. These contribute to students' confidence and control with different drawing tools and graphic media.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- increasing the popularity of the subject across all student groups by:
 - broadening the range of media, including more three-dimensional and digital media
 - developing opportunities for students to learn from craftworkers and designers past and present
 - broadening the range of subject matter and opportunities for students to apply their work.

- increasing the overall proportion of students achieving the higher grades by:
 - using assessment to promote students' achievement and personal development across different disciplines and courses
 - developing the specialist expertise of staff and a diversity of lesson approaches
 - working with other subjects in school, art departments in other schools and art educators in galleries.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop art, craft and design 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

Ian Middleton
Her Majesty's Inspector