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Mr David Farmer
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Dear Mr Farmer

Ofsted survey inspection programme – history

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

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the contribution of history to community cohesion and the development of independent learning in history.

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 learners, a scrutiny of relevant documentation, an analysis of students' work and the observation of ten lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be good.

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Achievement in history

- Achievement is good across all key stages. Results in national tests are generally above average and the quality of learning and progress is good in lessons and over time. Students in Year 8, for example, have a good understanding of the significance of the Spanish Armada from a local and national perspective. At A level, students demonstrate a good understanding of particular issues, for example about the place of the Korean War within the Cold War.

- Students evaluate historical evidence effectively and are able to explain the causes of important historical events. For example, in one lesson, Year 11 students assessed contemporary sources, making clear and articulate judgements with regard to the reliability of the evidence presented. Students benefit from opportunities to develop chronological understanding. Older students, for example, have a good appreciation of the developments in medicine over time.
- History makes a very good contribution to students' personal development. Students settle quickly to work and their behaviour in lessons is good. Their cooperative approach to working together and with their teachers is a notable feature of lessons. They are eager to contribute to discussions and demonstrate a genuine interest in history. Letters to celebrate endeavour and achievement are regularly sent home and this positive ethos is appreciated by pupils and parents alike.

Quality of teaching in history

The quality of teaching is good.

- Teachers plan their lessons conscientiously with a clear focus on learning objectives and learning outcomes. Good use is made of technology to support learning and promote achievement.
- A good variety of activities in lessons and effective questioning helps to extend students' knowledge and understanding and promotes their enjoyment. In less effective lessons, such opportunities are constrained by overly directed teaching with insufficient time given for students to reflect.
- The needs of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities are well met. Planning is shared with teaching assistants in advance, and any pertinent learning issues are identified and addressed. The needs of gifted and talented students are well met and appropriate extension activities feature in teachers' planning.
- Marking and assessment are good though some variability exists across the key stages. The best practice is seen in Key Stage 4, where marking consistently focuses on examination assessment criteria and identifies subject-specific points for improvement. This practice is now being developed in Key Stage 5. Assessment is less consistent at Key Stage 3. In particular, students are given insufficient opportunities to address the targets for improvement identified by their teachers.

Quality of the curriculum in history

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The curriculum at Key Stage 3 is broad, well-balanced and meets statutory requirements. Appropriate emphasis is given to local history through, for

example, the study of Totnes castle, Plymouth and the Spanish Armada, and the Battle of Freedom Fields.

- The Key Stage 3 curriculum has been planned well to ensure that students develop an understanding of key historical concepts and processes. However, planning for progression in subject-specific skills is not yet well developed.
- At Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form, detailed programmes of study have been developed to reflect examination requirements.
- There is a strong sense of continuity and progression from Year 7 to Year 13 and a good emphasis on developing chronological understanding.
- While students use and develop skills in information and communication technology (ICT) to enhance their work in history, this is most often done on homework tasks due to limited access to computer rooms at school. Students reported that they would like more opportunities to use ICT in lessons.
- Visits to the school by outside speakers complement the history curriculum. However, students said that they would like more opportunities to visit sites of historical interest, museums and archives.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in history

The effectiveness of leadership and management is outstanding.

- Outstanding leadership and management have ensured that developments in history provision are having a positive impact on history results and on the continued success of the subject within the school.
- The head of department provides clear direction to the work of the department. All staff take responsibility for curriculum development and their work is supported by well-targeted professional development. Staff are hard-working and there is an excellent team spirit.
- Strong management structures are underpinned by an appropriate development plan linked to the whole-school curriculum review. Accurate analysis of strengths and areas for development is accompanied by clear procedures for checking the work of the department. Plans are currently being developed to ensure that scrutiny of students' work is used more effectively to improve provision.
- Assessment and target-setting systems are thorough and are highly responsive to students' needs, particularly at Key Stage 4. Tracking procedures are highly sophisticated and are held up as a model of good practice within the school. Students are extremely appreciative of their teachers' willingness to give up their time to help them succeed.

Subject issue: the contribution of history to community cohesion

The contribution of history to community cohesion is outstanding.

- The department is developing a broad and relevant range of different units to develop local, national and global understanding. An excellent audit of provision has been used effectively to ensure that students engage with issues such as immigration, British identity, political literacy, religious intolerance and citizenship. While these themes are developed through a historical perspective, their relevance to the contemporary world is consistently made explicit to students.
- The annual Year 9 oral history project, involving members of the local community, is a great example of the department's work to develop community cohesion. As a result of this work, an excellent archive of local history is being created.
- The head of department's work in his role as an advanced skills teacher has helped develop a strong history teaching network across Plymouth. This has resulted in a number of outstanding learning opportunities for Plymstock students, and has included work with the National Trust and HMS Cambridge.

Subject issue: the development of independent learning in history

The development of independent learning in history is good.

- Independent learning is highlighted in schemes of work and is a regular and systematic feature of lessons.
- Students are regularly offered opportunities to scrutinise a wide range of evidence and to develop, challenge and justify their own points of view.
- Students embrace opportunities to direct their own approach to learning and share their reflections in class. However, in some lessons opportunities for independent learning are inhibited by too much teacher direction.
- Students work well individually and in groups. They concentrate for sustained periods and say how much they enjoy this type of work. Many A level students regard the independent study undertaken in Year 13 as a highlight of the course.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that students routinely use feedback to improve their work with appropriate time given for reflection, particularly at Key Stage 3
- ensuring there is an explicit and well-defined approach to progression in subject-specific skills at Key Stage 3 to enable teachers and students to evaluate progress more effectively across the curriculum.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop history 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

Karl Sampson
Her Majesty's Inspector