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Mr A Williams
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Williams

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: history

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 15 October 2009 to look at work in history.

As outlined in our initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the effectiveness of the school's approaches in improving the quality of teaching and 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 included interviews with students and staff, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of the subject, history, was judged to be good.

Achievement in history

Achievement in history is good.

- Standards are broadly average when students enter Year 7, but have been above average in recent years by the end of Year 11. All groups of students make good progress in Key Stages 3 and 4, and satisfactory progress in the sixth form.
- In lessons, students make good gains in knowledge and understanding in Key Stages 3 and 4. They are supported well to meet their examination targets through regular module assessments and reviews of progress.

- Students show high levels of motivation, work well with each other and are keen to meet their individual targets. They value the orderly atmosphere in lessons.

Quality of teaching of history

The quality of teaching of history is good.

- The history department is making effective use of national strategies' approaches to help improve teaching. Before sharing the learning objectives, the teacher sets an introductory task to promote thinking and discussion. This helps students to put forward their ideas and to understand the teacher's explanations. Students then work on exercises to consolidate and extend their learning, before reviewing what they have learnt in a plenary session. All these approaches help students to make good progress.
- Where the quality of teaching is good rather than outstanding, teachers have good history knowledge but the lesson activities do not always help students think about history in ways that might build their understanding more securely. For example, when students have to undertake rapid changes in activities, they often do not do enough reflective thinking for themselves about the history they are studying. Equally, when questions are asked quickly requiring a rapid response, students may answer them correctly but not in sufficient depth or elaboration. As a result, their teachers do not have enough opportunities to diagnose their difficulties as they work. Opportunities for students to develop their literacy and communication skills are similarly restricted.
- Students' progress is monitored through a well-planned sequence of assessment tasks. Not all teachers use assessment information arising from these to address effectively individual student weaknesses arising from earlier tasks. Students are encouraged well to engage in extra study, either in after-school investigations of web sites or using the school's own iPod revision materials which provide an independent source of explanation. This contributes well to students' good achievement in Key Stages 3 and 4. The school acknowledges that currently teachers' expectations of what students might achieve in the sixth form are not high enough and is planning to make targets more aspirational to raise standards.

Quality of the history curriculum

The quality of the history curriculum is good.

- The school offers a good range of courses to meet students' different needs, together with numerous visits to sites of historical importance for examination courses and links with the local community. The revised Year 7 and 8 curriculum includes a humanities approach to linking different subjects which provides good opportunities for cross-curricular projects, where students develop their problem-solving skills and learn about community cohesion. Students in Years 10 and 11 said they liked this

approach but thought they learned history better when studied as a discrete subject with a regular curriculum time allocation.

- The schemes of work are clear and detailed and provide a good indication how learning is to be developed in lessons. However, guidance on effective teaching approaches for stretching the more able history students is limited.
- Students benefit from very strong support, including a good revision programme in Year 11 to help them prepare for examinations.

Effectiveness of leadership and management of history

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of history is good.

- The history department has been led and managed well for some years but, under leadership of the current acting head of department, is making further, well-planned improvements. The main areas being improved include: the more rigorous use of performance targets for individuals and groups; careful tracking of students' progress to identify underachieving students; and better academic support and guidance.
- Humanities specialist status has played a good part in transforming provision in history. Students have access to many resources through the school's podcast initiative which is often used for homework. The school ensures equity for students by providing laptops and broadband connections for those who would otherwise not be able to access history provision easily.
- The department has a good capacity to improve further. The improvement plan is based securely on the results of monitoring and evaluation by the senior leaders, and both the head of humanities and acting head of history.

Subject issue: the contribution of history to community cohesion

- Teachers have a good understanding of the requirements to address community cohesion aspects through history. They have analysed carefully the ethnic diversity of the students who learn history and, recognising that the largest group are from White British backgrounds, have made good provision to broaden students' understanding of diversity in the local, national and world contexts. There are good visits to areas where the cultural mix is broader.
- The specialist status has given the head of department good opportunities to create themes and topics that directly relate to controversial issues, such as the nature and extent of terrorism and its impact on world events. Students said they valued these opportunities.

Subject issue: the development of independent learning in history

- The history department has made good provision for students to develop their independent learning skills. The introduction of podcasts and revision materials on the school's website has encouraged students to work more

on their own researching topics for use in school. Good use is made of the school's study centre for undertaking research and historical inquiries.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that lesson observations throughout the school take careful account of how well students have opportunities to develop their ideas in detail
- continuing to develop teachers' expertise in:
 - striking a good balance between routine and challenging exercises, especially for the more able
 - using diagnostic assessment to help all students to address their individual weaknesses in key skill areas
- improving progress in the sixth form by ensuring teachers build carefully on students' prior attainment and have higher expectations of what they can achieve.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop history in the school.

As explained in our previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Peter Limm
Her Majesty's Inspector