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Mrs S Westwood
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Dear Mrs Westwood

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: history

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 3 November 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 included interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, an analysis of students' work and the observation of three lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history is good.

Achievement in history

Achievement in history is good.

- Standards are broadly average when students enter Year 7, but above average by the end of Year 11. All groups of students make good progress in Key Stages 3 and 4.
- In lessons, students make good gains in knowledge, skills and understanding. They receive good support in preparing for examinations and to meet their targets.

- Students demonstrate good attitudes to learning and work well with each other as well as on their own. They can discuss their individual targets confidently and know what they need to do to meet them. Students behave well in lessons.

Quality of teaching of history

The quality of teaching of history is good.

- The history department is beginning to make effective use of national strategies' approaches to help improve teaching. These embrace sharing of lesson objectives at the beginning of lessons and using stimulating tasks to promote debates and discussions. Students said they valued the many opportunities to discuss important issues, such as the causes of wars. They also valued the support they obtained from teachers to help them make good progress.
- Teachers use their history knowledge well to generate thoughtful responses from students. Teachers allow students plenty of time to respond to questions. Students said they welcomed this 'thinking time' because some answers were difficult to communicate in history. There are also good opportunities for students to develop their literacy and communication skills over time.
- Students' progress is monitored through a well-planned sequence of assessment tasks. Students are encouraged well to engage in extra study, but opportunities for them to use information and communication technology (ICT) outside the classroom, are limited. In Years 8 and 9, teachers do not yet monitor students' progress in key thinking and history skills as well as they do in Year 7.

Quality of the history curriculum

The quality of the history curriculum is good.

- The school offers a wide range of courses to meet students' different needs, including visits to sites of historical importance. Local history is underdeveloped in the curriculum. The revised Year 7 curriculum provides a good introduction to skill work, but this is not yet embedded as well in Years 8 and 9. The department has made a number of strong links with other subjects, particularly English. The department is planning to strengthen these and make its contribution to citizenship and community cohesion more coherent.
- The schemes of work for Year 7 are clear and detailed and provide a good indication of how learning is to be developed following the introduction of the revised Key Stage 3 curriculum. Improvements are being made to the schemes for Years 8 and 9. Guidance on effective teaching approaches, to stretch the more able history students, is limited.
- Students benefit from good 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 is being led and managed well. There are two new members of staff in the department and they are working well with the head of department to make the subject one of the more popular ones in the school. The team works together well and has established good relationships with students.
- Humanities specialist status has played a good part in helping the department to focus on embedding innovations and new approaches to teaching and learning.
- 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 the departmental self-evaluation is very strong.

Subject issue: the contribution of history to community cohesion

- Teachers have a growing understanding of the requirements to teach aspects of community cohesion through history. The department has made good provision to broaden students' understanding of diversity in the local, national and world contexts, but acknowledges that this still lacks clarity and coherence in planning terms. There are a number of visits to schools where the cultural mix is broader.
- Students said they valued the opportunities to discuss controversial and potentially sensitive issues, such as terrorism and immigration.

Subject issue: the development of independent learning in history

- The history department has enabled students to develop their independent learning skills well. Students welcome opportunities to work on their own, and those who require additional support value the help of teaching assistants in strengthening their confidence to undertake independent learning tasks.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that the curriculum for Years 8 and 9 is planned effectively to build on the increased flexibilities introduced in primary schools and in Year 7
- providing additional opportunities to investigate local history
- continuing to develop teachers' expertise in using diagnostic assessment to help all students tackle their individual weaknesses in key skill areas, especially for the more able students in Years 8 and 9, and for the more able generally
- improving provision for the use of ICT in history.

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

Peter Limm
Her Majesty's Inspector