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Dear Mr Collins

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: history

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 11 and 12 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; a scrutiny of relevant documentation; an analysis of student's work; and the observation of eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history is good.

Achievement in history

Achievement in history is good.

- Standards are below average when students enter Year 7, but are broadly average by the end of Year 11. All groups of students make good progress during Key Stage 3 and the majority of students make good progress in Key Stage 4. Girls make better progress than boys, particularly in Key Stage 4, although the gap is narrowing due to the history department's work to improve the literacy skills of lower-attaining boys.
- At A level, students make satisfactory progress given their starting points. Some, though not the majority, make good progress.

- Good out-of-hours support, together with high-quality revision materials, makes a significant contribution to students' progress.
- In lessons, students make good gains in knowledge, but are less confident in their application of subject-specific skills, particularly when they are asked to assess the value of historical evidence.
- History makes a good contribution to their personal development. Behaviour is good and students enjoy their lessons. A service of remembrance, seen during the visit, enabled sixth-form students to demonstrate their outstanding moral and spiritual development in history.

Quality of teaching in history

The quality of teaching is good.

- Lessons are always planned thoroughly. Teachers use their good subject knowledge to plan learning activities which enable students to develop good knowledge and understanding.
- Learning objectives are always made clear to students so that they know exactly what they are trying to learn.
- Teachers make good use of assessment to ensure that students know how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve. However, in some lessons, success criteria are not defined with sufficient clarity. In these lessons, students do not fully understand what they need to do to meet or exceed their learning targets.
- Most teaching provides good opportunities for students to work in pairs to develop their confidence in exploring complex historical issues. In a small proportion of lessons, such opportunities are not fully exploited. In these lessons, fewer students are able to participate in discussions.
- Teachers make good use of technology to enhance learning through, for example, the use of digital images to promote enjoyment and understanding.

Quality of the curriculum in history

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The curriculum makes a good contribution to students' enjoyment of history. Students report that they enjoy the topics studied, with Crime and Punishment through time, the British Empire and the First World War among the most popular topics.
- History is a popular subject and the proportion of students opting to study history at GCSE has grown significantly in recent years to be above the national average.
- Schemes of work are developed well, particularly in Year 7, and reflect a coherent and well-organised approach to developing subject-specific knowledge and skills. This approach is less well-embedded in schemes of

work for other year groups which, while focusing on the knowledge to be gained, are less clear about how progression in skills will be achieved.

- Opportunities to produce detailed written work, for example on Crime and Punishment through Time or religious conflict in Northern Ireland, have provided good opportunities for students to develop their literacy skills.
- The school has made a satisfactory response to the revised Key Stage 3 curriculum, though local history and thematic approaches to history are not yet fully developed.
- The curriculum is supported by a small range of trips and visits, for example, to the battlefield of the First World War, though students reported that they would like more opportunities to visit museums and sites of historical importance.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in history

The effectiveness of leadership and management is good.

- Effective leadership and management have ensured that the majority of students make good progress in their learning. This, together with accurate self-evaluation, demonstrates the history department's good capacity to improve further.
- Good support for non-specialist and supply agency teachers ensures that all lessons are at least satisfactory and the majority are good. The department operates very effectively on a daily basis.
- Assessment information is used well to monitor students' progress so that underachievement can be quickly identified and tackled.
- Strategies to improve the achievement of boys, who are less confident in using their literacy skills, have started to have an impact. As a result, the difference between the achievement of boys and girls who are currently in Year 11 has narrowed significantly.

Subject issue: the contribution of history to community cohesion

The contribution of history to community cohesion is satisfactory.

- Teachers have a good understanding of the potential for history to contribute to community cohesion. Lessons on sensitive issues, such as immigration to the British Isles, or the Holocaust, are used to promote ethnic and religious tolerance. Strategies to promote community cohesion are not yet planned across the history curriculum.

Subject issue: the development of independent learning in history

The development of independent learning in history is good.

- Students respond well to opportunities to carry out their own research and produce extended pieces of writing. This is seen, for example, in their work on religious upheaval in Tudor England.

- Year 10 students are given good opportunities to develop their independent learning skills through extended homework projects, for example, on Mary Queen of Scots.
- Students are encouraged to learn independently through accessing carefully selected websites. For example, in the sixth form, students are encouraged to refer to the historical association website to gain access to more challenging texts.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that students are given clear guidance in all lessons so they fully understand how best to meet or exceed their challenging learning targets
- ensuring that all students are given regular opportunities to participate in class discussions and group work
- providing more opportunities for students to study local history and to deepen their chronological understanding through thematic studies across time.

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

Daniel Burton
Her Majesty's Inspector