

Aviation House  
125 Kingsway  
London  
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040  
F 020 7421 6855  
[enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
[www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)



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Dr C J Nicholls  
Headteacher  
Moulsham High School and Humanities College  
Brian Close  
Chelmsford  
Essex  
CM2 9ES

Dear Dr Nicholls

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: history

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 18 and 19 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.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with you, staff and students; a scrutiny of relevant documentation; an analysis of students' work; and the observation of eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history is good.

Achievement in history

Achievement is good.

- Students make good progress in lessons and over time. They attain standards by the age of 16 that are broadly average and recent results in the GCSE examinations have fluctuated around the national averages. In the sixth form, students make good progress and achieve average standards.
- Students are developing their knowledge, understanding and skills well. Those in Year 7, for example, know some of the main reasons for the

decline of the Roman Empire, while students in Year 10 have a good understanding of Hitler's foreign policy in the 1930s.

- Students work well with historical sources. They know how to evaluate these, to look for bias and to make deductions.
- Students' behaviour is outstanding. They enter classrooms in a mature manner, settle down to work quickly and have excellent attitudes to their learning. They maintain their concentration on the tasks set. They work extremely well in pairs and in small groups. Students enjoy the good quality of learning that teachers offer them.

### Quality of teaching in history

The quality of teaching is good.

- Lessons are planned in great detail and the needs of the various abilities are explicitly identified. There is some good evidence of the evaluation of prior learning and the adaptation of planning to ensure that students fully grasp what they study.
- The evaluation of previous learning and progress has led to the setting of challenging activities. Teachers use their good subject knowledge to extend the students' understanding, for example about whether votes for women were justified or whether Stalin was a good leader.
- Teachers introduce lessons well. They recap previous learning and routinely share learning objectives with the class. Students are regularly asked to assess the extent to which these objectives have been met. This leads to teachers having realistically high expectations of all students.
- Lessons are characterised by a good learning environment and outstanding relationships.
- Teachers offer good feedback to students in lessons. They mark the students' work regularly and make detailed, evaluative comments. The students said they found these very helpful. They also said that staff would go out of their way to help them.
- The needs of all abilities are routinely met through the good teaching. However, learning support assistants are not always efficiently used in lessons and there are no specific targets in history for particular groups of vulnerable students.

### Quality of the curriculum in history

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The department is revising its approach to Key Stage 3 and is implementing the new requirements well. In Years 7 and 8, the curriculum is being refocused so that there is more of an emphasis on developing students' conceptual understanding. Plans are well under way to modify the Year 9 curriculum too.

- The department anticipates introducing significant changes at Key Stage 4 in September 2010. It will introduce the Schools' History Project which it feels will engage students more fully in their learning. In the sixth form, students follow the requirements of the AS and A-level courses well and detailed schemes of work are being developed to support these.
- Across the school, schemes of work have been drafted well to enhance continuity and progression for all students. Students enjoy learning history at all ages because of the wide range of topics studied and the approaches to teaching that are taken.
- The department offers some enrichment activities but these are limited. Older students visit the First World War battlefields in Belgium and there was a joint trip recently to Hedingham Castle as part of the school's specialism in humanities. Not many outside visitors, for instance, come into school to talk about aspects of history.

#### Effectiveness of leadership and management in history

The effectiveness of leadership and management is good.

- The recently appointed head of department provides good leadership to the work of the department. She has undertaken a thorough review of the department's work and has a very good understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. Monitoring and evaluation procedures are thorough.
- Appropriate priorities have been identified and the department is working well towards these. It is hoped that the implementation of these priorities will lead to better outcomes, particularly at Key Stage 4. It is too early to make a judgement on their impact but internal monitoring at Key Stage 3 shows that students are making better progress. The department has introduced baseline assessments in history from Year 7 to enable better monitoring of students' progress. This is a good recent development.
- The department benefits from good team spirit and the staff work hard. Some good initiatives have already been undertaken to improve students' progress and the quality of their learning. These are supported by appropriate professional development for staff. As a result of such actions, the department has a good capacity to improve even further.

#### Subject issue: the contribution of history to community cohesion

The contribution of history to community cohesion is satisfactory.

- Some students' understanding of their community has been enhanced by visiting local residents to talk about their experiences of the Second World War.
- Students are taught a broad range of historical topics which develops their global understanding. They learn about the fight for civil rights in the USA, for example, and the department has introduced a study unit on Islamic

civilisations at Key Stage 3. It also hopes to introduce further study of the British Empire. All such work is at an early stage of development.

Subject issue: the development of independent learning in history

The development of independent learning in history is good.

- Students are encouraged to work in pairs and in small groups in lessons. They do this well and sustain their concentration on the tasks set. They also work well on their own.
- Good opportunities are provided for students to undertake extended research work using information and communication technology. They work on computers in the shared area outside classrooms and also use laptops in lessons. Students said they valued such opportunities.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that learning support assistants are used more effectively in lessons through greater joint planning
- ensuring that specific targets are identified for different groups of vulnerable students, and that progress towards these targets is routinely measured and evaluated
- ensuring that the school offers a wider range of enrichment activities, including the expansion of visits to places of historical interest, and that visitors are more regularly invited into the school to talk about different aspects of 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

Champak Chauhan  
Additional Inspector