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Mr M Smallwood
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Dear Mr Smallwood

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 21 and 22 September 2009, to look at work in modern languages (ML).

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on take-up in Key Stage 4, and the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to improve language learning.

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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML is good.

Achievement in languages

Achievement in languages is satisfactory.

- In 2008, the proportion of students attaining grades A* to C at GCSE level was above average. Results were stronger in French than in Spanish. Attainment in Key Stage 4 is above average. In Key Stage 3, it is below average. According to teacher assessments, this is because standards on entry to the school are typically below average.
- The progress made by students in lessons was good.

- Writing is good. Extended writing includes appropriate use of grammar, punctuation and a good range of vocabulary. Younger students have fewer opportunities to complete extended writing. Reading skills are being developed well through the use of textbooks, worksheets and interactive whiteboards. Foreign language magazines are also available in each classroom for those who have completed their work.
- Students' spoken skills and pronunciation are satisfactory, but intonation is underdeveloped. Some lack confidence in speaking and in manipulating the language they are studying in order to say what they mean.
- Students have a satisfactory awareness of the importance of languages and an adequate knowledge of careers in which they can be used.
- Students' intercultural understanding, particularly in Key Stage 3, is underdeveloped.
- ML makes a good contribution to students' personal development. Behaviour was good overall in the lessons observed. Students enjoy learning languages and cite active participation in lessons and the acquisition of new knowledge and vocabulary as reasons for this.

Quality of teaching of languages

Teaching in languages is good.

- Teaching is typically fast-paced, lively and characterised by good relationships between staff and learners. Work is challenging and teachers make good use of the target language.
- Teachers' subject knowledge and pronunciation are good and, in some cases, very good. They understand examination requirements well.
- Planning follows the school's format, with learning objectives being clearly explained at the start of each lesson. It is supported well by high-quality data on students' attainment and progress. Planning also takes into account the learning styles of students, which influences the choice of teaching materials in lessons.
- Starter sessions are good and revise students' prior knowledge but some plenary sessions are too short.
- Teachers model new vocabulary well and correct mispronunciations sensitively. However, there is scope to provide more opportunities for students to practise speaking in the language they are learning, in order to develop their confidence and their ability to use new vocabulary.
- A good range of activities is used in lessons.
- Marking is good and comments by teachers give students useful guidance on how to improve their work.

Quality of the curriculum in languages

The curriculum in languages is good.

- There is a good allocation of time to ML. In Key Stage 3, students study French or Spanish. Their preferences and those of their parents are taken into account. More able students in Year 8 and Year 9 are also able to study German. In Year 10, most students who continue with a language follow the one they have studied in Key Stage 3. However, the school readily supports those who wish to start afresh with another language.
- Students in Key stage 4 are able to study two languages to GCSE level, although few choose to do so. The ML department has been innovative in exploring alternative, vocational accreditation for students in Year 9 which has increased students' interest in languages. In Year 11, a scheme linked to the school's PE specialism has successfully attracted back to language learning a sizeable number of students who had not chosen languages as an option for study in Key Stage 4.
- The curriculum is enhanced by annual trips to France, Germany and Spain and different extra curricular activities.
- Schemes of work for Key Stage 3 are based on national frameworks and have been rewritten to match students' interests and needs. Each unit of study is supported by an informative homework booklet and staff are available after school to assist with homework.
- Extra classes at weekends and Easter are held for students studying for GCSE qualifications and these have contributed to above average results at Key Stage 4.
- Very useful displays on the three languages taught in the department provide good guidance for students on how to achieve higher national curriculum levels in their work.
- Students, with English as an additional language, are encouraged to take qualifications in their home language and are supported well.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in languages

Leadership and management in languages are good with outstanding features.

- You, and the governing body, are very supportive of languages and have encouraged the introduction of alternative accreditation and the introduction of a third language into the department. There are plans to consider the introduction of Chinese.
- Leadership of the ML department is good. This is reflected in the introduction of German and alternative routes of accreditation, and development of good links with the school's specialist department of PE and with four universities. Good links have been built up with local primary and high schools. As a result, the school is due to benefit from the skills of foreign language assistants. There is a concerted effort on behalf of the department to ensure that the successes of students at GCSE level are celebrated. As a result of this good leadership, the uptake of languages at Key Stage 4 has risen steadily in recent years.

- The subject leader is fully involved in the school's cycle of monitoring teaching and learning. Subject documentation is of high quality. The departmental development plan is thorough, focused on improvement and assesses staff training needs. Previous plans are evaluated well. Data are well used, particularly at Key Stage 4, to monitor students' progress, plan extra support and inform regular reports to governors.

How close the school is to reaching the benchmarks for language take-up in Key Stage 4

The take up is below the benchmarks set out by the Secretary of State in 2006. The proportions of students studying a language in Years 10 and 11 are 25% and 22% respectively. However, the uptake of languages has risen steadily over the last three years, partly as a result of the department's strong efforts in making language learning more enjoyable.

How well ICT is used to improve language learning

This is good.

- Regular use is made of an ICT suite to help students learn about different topics and to listen to authentic foreign language speakers.
- Students make use of a number of appropriate websites that are accessible via the school website.
- ICT is used well for management purposes, including data analysis.
- Interactive whiteboards are used regularly in lessons to introduce new vocabulary and concepts, to enable students to play language games and to provide opportunities for reading.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising standards at Key Stage 3
- providing students with more opportunities to practise their speaking skills in lessons, so that they may increase their confidence, intonation and pronunciation and their manipulation of the language
- developing students' intercultural understanding.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop modern languages 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

Michael McIlroy
Her Majesty's Inspector