

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr A Hutchinson
Principal
Parkside Community College
Parkside
Cambridge
CB1 1EH

Dear Mr Hutchinson

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: modern languages (ML)

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 19 and 20 November 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.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work, observation of seven lessons and two extra-curricular events.

The overall effectiveness of ML is outstanding.

Achievement in languages

Achievement is outstanding.

- Students' results at the end of Key Stage 4 are well above average. There has been a slightly improving trend over the last three years. Almost all students take French and the number gaining grades A* to A in French is twice the national average. The number gaining A* to A grades in Italian is very high.
- By the end of Key Stage 3, students attain higher than expected outcomes.

- Progress in lessons observed and in exercise books scrutinised was between good and outstanding. Very good prior learning was demonstrated in lessons. In a Year 10 'ab initio' Italian lesson, for example, students showed that, after only two months, they could work in Italian and begin to work out and use the future tense.
- Students speak confidently on the lesson topics from an early age and, in most cases, with good pronunciation because teachers practise this with them and are good role-models. They listen and respond accurately to both commercial resources and to the teacher and each other.
- They are able to deduce meaning from text, even when they have met few of the words before, using language-learning strategies built up from early in their learning.
- They write at length and creatively from early in school. They communicate very well despite some grammatical inaccuracies from time to time.
- Students were complimentary about languages and they like the fact that their school is a language college. They enjoy the opportunities provided. They are aware why they need to learn a language and its importance in their future. Their behaviour in lessons is excellent. It is also enough to ensure good interactive sessions. They have enquiring minds and ask questions about new learning.

Quality of teaching of languages

Overall, the quality of teaching is outstanding.

- Lessons observed were planned very well and differentiated with good opportunities for AfL. Teachers have very good subject knowledge and for the most part teach in the target languages so that students have maximum exposure to them. However, teachers do not always teach students the routines they need to carry out day-to-day exchanges outside the topic areas.
- Teachers have a good knowledge of language learning methodology. On the whole, electronic whiteboards (EWB) and software are used well to engage students and practise language. Students often take over the role of teachers at the front of the class using the EWB and question their peers.
- There are very good working relationships in lessons which enable a variety of excellent activities to achieve objectives set. Teachers use text very well to help students deduce meaning and this is often a way into a lesson.
- Marking is excellent. It provides students with knowledge of their strengths, clear areas for improvement, and targets to aim for. Students say they are confident about what they need to improve in different skills.

Quality of the curriculum in languages

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding.

- Curriculum opportunities meet the needs of students, promote creativity and contribute to enjoyment very well. The school and department make a very good effort to cater for different abilities and needs.
- The range of languages available in Key Stage 4 at GCSE along with a new vocational accreditation; the range of languages in after-school clubs for Key Stage 3; the opportunities for extra-curricular activities; and European and international visits; all ensure outstanding provision.
- The time allocated to learning languages on the curriculum is good.
- Schemes of work, particularly the new ones being drawn up, are excellent, although they could draw more attention to the potential for ICT to raise achievement. They take account of the revised National Curriculum including cross-curricular themes.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in languages

Leadership is outstanding.

- Strategic leadership at the top has seen the school's language provision and outcomes improve exponentially over a number of years. The school's relatively recent re-designation to language college status is improving languages even further.
- Subject leadership is very strong. The self-evaluation provides a robust analysis of the department's achievements with sharp priorities for improvement. For example, boys' achievement in Key Stage 3 is not as strong as girls' and this is a focus. The development plan is well-focused on language improvement.
- Leadership at all levels looks carefully to engage young people in their learning of a language. For example, it recently introduced a French NVQ for students of a less academic nature and this is proving very popular.
- Resources are very good. Rooms have carpets and blinds and there is a good variety of equipment including digital resources, cameras, mobile phones for the NVQ lessons, and video conferencing for linking internationally.
- The school has been working with its primary schools for a number of years and thinks that one of the reasons for its very good ML results is partly the good start the younger students have in French. Staff are knowledgeable about what its primary pupils have studied before they come to Parkside.
- It works very closely with its federated school to improve ML outcomes. The school provides adult language-learning classes for beginners and is in the early stages of developing provision further.

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

Benchmarks for language college status and the Secretary of State's requirements are exceeded.

How well ICT is used to improve language learning

This is good.

- The school has a good range of technology including video-conferencing materials to link with schools abroad. The use of media is also embedded in the department - a legacy from the school's previous designation.
- It has a bank of wireless laptops to equip one classroom but no computer suite. While observing a potentially exciting lesson, lack of internet access let it down.
- Students report that they use ICT reasonably regularly, for example: for some research or revision work. No one reported using it for drafting and re-drafting writing for accuracy. Year 10 NVQ classes use it very regularly.
- The EWB is used well by teachers to present and consolidate work and students often interact with these activities. Sometimes, visibility of written work on the board is poor for those at the back of the classroom.
- There is no policy or visionary document for ICT, although it is included in development planning and there are some activities in schemes of work. These do not yet highlight how the ICT will improve language learning.
- The department does not yet monitor the use of ICT and so cannot yet tell whether students achieve better because of it.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- developing students' speaking skills so that they can operate routinely in the target languages in lessons
- setting out a clear policy for the use of ICT which can be tracked into schemes of work and departmental use, and monitor how effective it is in terms of students' achievement.

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

Pam Haezewindt
Her Majesty's Inspector