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3 December 2009

Mr A Wilde
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Dear Mr Wilde

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 23 and 24 November 2009 to look at work in 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 and observation of six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML is good.

Achievement in languages

Achievement is good.

- Standards in Key Stage 3 are above average. Students come from a large number of primary schools with a wide range of prior experience. The department builds successfully on their experience.
- The percentage gaining grade C or above in GCSE examinations in 2009 was above the national average and all students gained a qualification.

- From their broadly average starting points, students make good progress. Boys, girls and all other groups of students make similar progress.
- The number of students studying languages in the sixth form is small. The department is working hard to increase take-up, but those who do pursue an A-level course in ML achieve well.
- Progress in the lessons observed was mostly good.
- Students cooperate well in lessons with the teacher and with each other. They exhibit good behaviour and attitudes.
- Students' cultural understanding is somewhat limited. However, the support for community languages promotes racial harmony.
- Students have a satisfactory understanding of the usefulness of studying a modern language to their future career chances.

Quality of teaching of languages

The quality of teaching is good.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge and good classroom management skills. All can teach both main languages which supports consistency.
- Teachers plan carefully to ensure their lessons include a range of activities, using good resources, including ICT.
- There is variability in the way teachers use the language for managing the lessons and for communicating directly with the students. Expectations of the students in using the language to respond are not high enough. This has a negative impact on their confidence when speaking.
- Assessment is used well to enable teachers to provide effective support. There are insufficient opportunities built into the lesson to challenge the more able linguists.
- The department is highly inclusive. Almost all students study two languages in Key Stage 3. Teaching assistants contribute well to learning, especially those who are native speakers.
- Teachers mark students' work regularly and often provide feedback on how to improve the work. Not enough attention is paid to ensuring the poor presentation evident in some books is improved.

Quality of the curriculum in languages

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- In addition to French and Spanish as the main languages on offer, students can study other languages through after-school clubs.
- There is a good range of extra-curricular activities and trips which are well supported and make a strong contribution to the personal and social development of the students.

- There are some opportunities for students to be involved in creative projects, but an aspect of creativity which is less well-developed is the students' spontaneous use of language and their ability to respond to the unexpected.
- Classrooms are bright and welcoming and colourful displays support students' language acquisition well.
- Schemes of work are being refined in the light of the new national framework for languages, but this is at an early stage of development.
- The sixth form curriculum is restricted by small numbers but cooperative links with a local school have broadened the offer.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in languages

Leadership is good.

- The strength of the leadership is evident in the way a period of instability and staffing difficulties have been resolved.
- Monitoring activities are regular and areas for development are accurately identified.
- Self-evaluation at departmental level is based on a wide range of evidence but does not sufficiently focus on the outcomes of all groups and is, consequently, sometimes generous in its judgements.
- You and your senior team support the department well by modelling strong leadership skills.
- Governors take a keen interest in the development of the subject.

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

Nearly half of the students chose to study at least one language in Key Stage 4 last year. The school is working towards a target of 60% in the next few years. A small minority of students study two languages and some gain qualifications in their home language.

How well ICT is used to improve language learning

This is good.

- Teachers plan to use ICT to improve students' reading and to support their preparation for examinations, especially in relation to homework.
- There is good use of interactive whiteboards.
- Students have regular access to computers and use a range of different programmes to support their learning.
- The departmental website is used well to share resources and students appreciate the opportunities to practise at home.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring teachers clearly identify in their planning how and when the more able students will be given opportunities to increase the depth of their understanding of the language items being studied
- increasing the expectation that the language being studied will be the principal means of communication
- sharpening self-evaluation so there is a clearer focus on the outcomes of all groups of students.

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

Elaine Taylor
Her Majesty's Inspector