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Mr C Dean
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Dean

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: art, craft and design

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 25 and 26 January 2010 to look at work in art, craft and design.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on how effectively students learn to draw with confidence and creativity.

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 10 lessons and a primary school visit to the school gallery.

The overall effectiveness of art, craft and design is outstanding.

Achievement in art, craft and design

Students' achievement in art, craft and design is outstanding.

- From wide-ranging starting points in Year 7, students work with interest and intensity to fulfil the high expectations of their teachers. By Year 9, boys and girls respond with maturity to opportunities to specialise.
- Students make well-informed choices about pursuing the creative potential of two and/or three-dimensional media, photography, film, textiles and fashion. Strong commitment and polished presentation are common across different media. Strengths in abstracting and applying design, interpreting and communicating emotions, underpin some of the highest achievement.

- Overall, students attain impressive examination results in the subject, higher than national averages and, for many students, higher than in their other subjects. While there is some variation between different disciplines, boys and girls, achievement is outstanding, given that all students at the school take an examination in the subject, compared with around a third nationally.
- Students successfully combine their creative development with meeting assessment objectives. Students' contact with and understanding about creative practitioners build their confidence to experiment, improvise and strive for originality while refining their ideas and crafting their skills.

Quality of teaching of art, craft and design

The quality of teaching of art, craft and design is outstanding.

- The use of assessment by teachers, support staff and students is exemplary. Detailed, constructive dialogue in lessons is reinforced well by written records directed at different stages of students' work, pinpointing strengths and weaknesses. Students mirror the use of carefully considered comments when assessing their own work and that of their peers or teachers.
- Teachers are expert at working with students, support staff and artists to ensure that possible barriers to learning are overcome. Successful integration of students from another school in the 'Campus Luton' consortium was observed. Innovative use is made of film, capturing depth of reflection and understanding, unconstrained by students' writing skills.
- There is a clear distinction between demonstrations, packed with advice that all students need to know, and strategies that make the most of individual strengths. Students can appear passive in discussion but high levels of motivation when they return to their work show that teachers' expertise is highly respected. Voluntary opportunities are well supported.
- Despite the aged accommodation, displays in all rooms are visually stimulating. Teachers skilfully refer to the 'quality wall' in each studio which includes their own work or that of an artist working with the group. Conscientiously prepared resources, including examples stored digitally, enable teachers to tailor stimuli to needs and interest quickly.

Quality of the curriculum in art, craft and design

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding.

- The range of choices available to students when choosing their examination options in Year 8 is wide. The discussion groups contributing to the inspection were confident that the needs and interests of their peers were met, a view supported by students in lessons. One commented: 'Other schools might have two art teachers; we have two art blocks'.
- Curriculum continuity with the primary phase is promoted through shared use of the on-site gallery, outreach workshops and enrichment activities at

Icknield. These are aimed at stimulating and spotting talent, a critical component of the school's strategy to start examinations in art at the start of Year 9.

- Lesson content achieves an excellent balance between capitalising on students' cultural interests with exploring the unfamiliar. Their cultural development grows as a consequence. It is common for the curriculum to introduce students to art, craft and design created at different times and in distant places, through the influences on contemporary practice. Schemes of work ensure that students' progress is structured while the subject knowledge of staff is continuously used to refresh content.
- Learning outside the classroom is integrated well. Visits relate clearly to specific course objectives, ranging from galleries to the IMAX cinema. A range of optional opportunities enables students to extend their learning through after-school workshops, residential experience or summer school. Ambitious plans are in place to develop virtual learning environments.

Effectiveness of leadership and management of art, craft and design

The leadership and management of art, craft and design are outstanding.

- The strength of commitment to high-quality provision in the subject is evident at all levels. The school's specialist visual arts status is very well established and pervades all subjects. The school expects and enables all students to grow culturally, creatively and confidently through art, craft and design. Innovative vision for the future development of the subject indicates it is well placed to stay at the forefront of the school's progress and reputation.
- High-quality resources are selected and deployed judiciously. For example, digital media used to narrow the gap between high performance of girls and that of boys. The recruitment and development of highly competent, specialist teachers and a senior leader, who is able to identify and share and success, while also presenting challenge, have been pivotal.
- An excellent balance is achieved between empowering teachers to 'take risks' by leading their own innovation and ensuring common practice when this is in the interest of promoting high-quality provision. Several trainee teachers have flourished in this environment, including staff now teaching in the department who started out in a trainee or support role.
- Additional roles, including coordinators of artists in residence and the on-site gallery, add to the impact of the subject across the school and local community. Particularly successful initiatives have embraced the traditional and contemporary, international and local including, for example, a visit by a famous hat designer in the context of Luton's history of millinery.

Subject issue: how effectively students learn to draw with confidence and creativity

- Students' learning about how to draw with confidence and creativity is good. Starting with opportunities to draw from observation, imagination and memory that establish students' baseline, they build the confidence to

invent marks, express feelings and communicate ideas. Teachers use their expertise to help overcome the preconceptions of students who start at the school with little self-belief in their capacity to draw. Nevertheless, not all students recognise their developing fluency with different tools, techniques and technology as drawing, retaining a traditional view of drawing. Drawings made at home sometimes revert to less confident use of graphic media in stark contrast to their bold and fluent work in school.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- embedding the impact of the subject across the school and community by ensuring that all stakeholders understand the rationale developed and shared by teachers, artists and support staff, including that relating to drawing.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop art, craft and design 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

Ian Middleton
Her Majesty's Inspector