

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Ms A Bright
Headteacher
Birchwood Community High School
Brock Road
Birchwood
Warrington
WA3 7PT

Dear Ms Bright

Ofsted 2010-11 subject survey inspection programme: history

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 21 and 22 April 2010 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 staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of nine lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history is satisfactory.

Achievement in history

Achievement in history is satisfactory.

- Leaders and managers recognise that in 2009 students' achievements by the end of Key Stage 4 were inadequate. Standards of attainment were below average and only a minority of students met or exceeded their targets. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities made inadequate progress. However, significant improvements to the quality of leadership and management, combined with more stable staffing, are now ensuring that the majority of current students, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities are making satisfactory progress.

- Students develop good knowledge and understanding of topics they study in depth, for example, through their studies of the Norman Conquest and the English Civil War in Key Stage 3 and the First World War in Key Stage 4. Less secure, particularly at Key Stage 3, is students' understanding of key historical concepts and processes. This hinders their progress in developing subject-specific skills.
- History makes a positive contribution to students' personal development. Students enjoy history and behave well in lessons. They thrive when teaching is at its best.

Quality of teaching in history

The quality of teaching in history is good.

- Lessons are meticulously prepared and routinely include a wide range of activities to stimulate students' engagement. Relationships between staff and students are good and make a significant contribution to the satisfactory progress current students are making.
- When teaching is most effective, learning activities are sharply focused on carefully crafted lesson objectives against which students can accurately measure their progress. In these lessons, teachers use their acute knowledge of students' abilities to ensure that activities provide appropriate challenge for all.
- In good and outstanding lessons, support staff are deployed to maximum effect to remove barriers to learning for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities. However, in a small proportion of lessons, teachers do not give sufficient regard to the contrasting needs and abilities of students so that work is too hard for some but insufficiently challenging for others.
- On occasions, too much of the learning time is dominated by insufficiently well-focused teacher talk. In other lessons, teachers try to pack in too many activities. This sometimes restricts opportunities for students to engage in high-quality and sharply focused evaluative thinking.
- The use of assessment to support learning is inconsistent. While teachers mark work conscientiously, work is not always marked against clearly defined learning objectives and targets. As a result, marking does not yet have sufficient impact in raising achievement.

Quality of the curriculum in history

The quality of the curriculum in history is satisfactory.

- The curriculum successfully secures students' engagement and enjoyment. Twice as many students opt to study GCSE history than is seen nationally.
- Staff have recently introduced a new GCSE course to meet students' needs, interests and aspirations more effectively. Students in Year 10 report that they appreciate the increased opportunities to study modern world history that this course provides.

- Students benefit from good opportunities to study local history, for example through their investigations into the impact of cholera epidemics in the 19th century on Warrington and working conditions in the Royal Ordnance Factory at Risley.
- While there are good opportunities to study topics in depth at Key Stage 3, opportunities to study change and continuity across different historical periods, through thematic approaches to history, are more limited. Schemes of work do not yet fully reflect the range and content of the revised Key Stage 3 curriculum. For example, coverage of the different histories and changing relationships through time of the people of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales are extremely limited.
- The department has started to plan for progression in the development of students' understanding of key concepts and processes. However, work in this area is at an early stage and has not yet had sufficient impact in raising students' awareness of how they can improve their subject-specific skills.
- The curriculum is enhanced through visits to sites of historical importance, including the battlefields of the First World War and Auschwitz.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in history

The effectiveness of the leadership and management in history is good.

- The appointment of the current head of humanities has significantly strengthened the capacity of the department to improve. Ambitious, determined and purposeful leadership has given staff renewed confidence and determination to improve standards.
- Improvement plans are based on rigorous, honest and reflective self-evaluation. Roles and responsibilities have been sharply defined so that all members of staff can be supported and held to account.
- Systems to monitor students' progress are far more thorough than before and ensure that those who are falling behind or need additional help are given timely and effective support. This is having a marked impact on the achievement of current Year 11 students as they prepare for their GCSE examinations.

Subject issue: the contribution of history to community cohesion

The contribution of history to community cohesion is good.

- History ensures that students develop good knowledge and understanding of the local community. Students' excellent work on the impact of slavery on Warrington was showcased at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool. Cross-curricular work on topics, such as Picasso's Guernica, enables students to consider the impact and experience of warfare on communities other than their own. Links with a school in South Africa are exploited through collaborative work on individuals, such as Martin Luther King and Benjamin Zephaniah. Less well developed is students'

understanding through history of diverse cultures within the United Kingdom and their understanding of the development of political power over time.

Subject issue: the development of independent learning in history

The development of independent learning in history is satisfactory.

- Students in Year 8 benefit from good opportunities to complete extended homework projects on topics such as the execution of King Louis XVI and the impact of the British Empire. Teachers' lesson planning and questioning techniques provide good opportunities for students to develop their enquiry skills. Information and communication technology is used to promote independent learning with regard to developing students' research and communication skills. However, students do not yet evaluate the quality of their own research and build on the lessons learnt. Although staff are committed to developing students' personal learning and thinking skills, they do not always give sufficient thought to how this might best be achieved in lessons. As a result, the focus on independent learning sometimes inhibits rather than enhances students' achievement.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising achievement by the end of Key Stage 4
- improving the use of assessment so that:
 - lessons are consistently matched to the needs of all groups of learners
 - students have a clear understanding of how well they are doing in history and how they can improve their subject specific skills
- ensuring that the Key Stage 3 curriculum provides a more appropriate balance in the range and content of topics to be studied.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop history in the school.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on the Ofsted website under the unique reference number for your school. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Daniel Burton
Her Majesty's Inspector