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Mrs D Halpin
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Dear Mrs Halpin

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: modern languages (ML)

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 16 and 17 February 2011 to look at work in ML.

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 without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML is satisfactory.

Achievement in languages

Achievement in languages is satisfactory.

- From a low base in 2010, achievement in languages has improved significantly. The great majority of a small Year 11 German group have already been awarded Level 2 in the Asset Languages qualification. Tracking confirms that standards in Year 9 are broadly average. Students now make satisfactory progress throughout the school because they enjoy their ML lessons and take an active part in shaping their own learning.
- Achievement is uneven across the four skills because students are reluctant to use the language being studied, particularly in speaking work. They demonstrate understanding of spoken and written materials, but

prefer to do so in English. There is too much English used in the classroom and too little use of authentic materials or exposure to native speakers.

- Although many students enjoy success in much of their learning, they fail to see the language as representing another culture's way of life. Younger students' views on the value of learning languages are often simplistic, such as to use language on holiday or 'because it's easy'. They do, however, appreciate the language skills of the few students in school whose home language is not English.

Quality of teaching in languages

The quality of teaching in languages is satisfactory.

- Teachers bring enthusiasm and a high level of subject knowledge in more than one language to the classroom. They promote learning through good relationships with their students and a wide range of well-resourced activities. This teaching encourages a good pace of learning and students are regularly encouraged to evaluate their outcomes through self- and peer-assessment.
- Students say that they like the different way they learn in ML, compared with their other subjects. Students particularly enjoy the opportunity to learn in groups; 'I like learning for yourself,' 'It's interactive...very positive.' Even Key Stage 4 students still like games; 'We like activities with a competitive touch.' However, the language being studied plays too small a part in this learning. Both teachers and pupils speak too much English and, when the instinctive reaction to a question or situation should be in French or German, it is too often in English.
- Good use of the interactive whiteboard engages students and encourages them to play an active part in lessons. Opportunities to use computers are less regularly available, although some older students find language materials on their own computers at home. However, the use of information and communication technology in school to introduce students to the culture of other countries is underdeveloped.
- The greatest impact on learning and progress in ML has been achieved through the good assessment procedures which have been introduced and developed during the most recent year. This assessment has become embedded in the teaching and learning of ML and provides robust evidence of the whole-school standards, progress and targets. It is regularly used by teachers in planning lessons which respond to the needs of individual students. Most of all, it has involved students themselves in understanding their learning and progress, which provides high levels of motivation.

Quality of the curriculum in languages

The quality of the curriculum in languages is satisfactory.

- The ML curriculum makes the best of limitations imposed by the size of the school and its teaching resources. Most students will have access to two of three languages: French, German and Spanish. Year 7 students learn French or German in alternate years and have the opportunity to begin Spanish in Year 9. The school's action on doubling the teaching time in Years 7 and 8 has already had a marked effect on progress. Additional staffing has enabled Year 10 students to study French in smaller groups with improving outcomes. The time allocation in Year 9 will be doubled from September 2011.
- The school has successfully introduced Asset Languages as an alternative means of accreditation and this has helped students to enjoy greater success. Many of them followed a ML course in their primary schools, but do not feel that it was of much benefit because there was no continuity of language in many cases, and there is rarely uniform prior experience in any one class. Students have succeeded in gaining accreditation in home languages other than English. Schemes of work, based on commercial courses do not relate sufficiently to the specific needs of the school.
- Students' understanding of the culture of the countries whose languages they learn is limited because of the lack of extra-curricular activities. The school library does not have a stock of books or other materials in other languages.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in languages

The effectiveness of the leadership and management in languages is satisfactory.

- You and the other leaders in the school have played a significant role in securing improvements in ML achievement thus far and are committed and enthusiastic to see the work develop further. The subject leader has been effective in self-evaluation, planning and implementation to date, which indicates good capacity to inspire further progress.
- Monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning have been regular resulting in improving quality. The positive attitudes and enthusiasm of students are evidence of the new optimism for language learning. Almost all students enjoy ML and a significant number of older students want to follow a post-16 course.
- Leaders have ensured that accommodation is a bright, spacious and attractive learning environment with good displays, particularly of students' work. A third 'spare' teaching space allows classes to break up for group work, which students say that they really enjoy. The school had previously supported its family of primary schools in their ML teaching and learning, but this has now discontinued.
- Action to tackle the very low percentage of students following a ML course in Key Stage 4 is starting to have an impact. The percentage will increase to at least 40% in Year 10 from September 2011 as the change in the core curriculum comes into practice.

- The school has provided generous professional development for teachers in the ML department which has supported them in bringing about the improvements seen.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- placing the language being studied at the heart of learning through increased use of the language by both teachers and students
- connecting students' learning experience to an understanding of the culture of the countries whose languages they learn, through increased use of authentic materials, contact with native speakers and access to visits abroad.

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

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection.

Yours sincerely

Peter McKenzie
Additional Inspector