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Mr J Whittle
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Whittle

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: history

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 22 and 23 February 2012 to look at work 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 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 history is satisfactory.

Achievement in history

Achievement in history is satisfactory.

- Attainment is broadly average and students make satisfactory progress over time at all key stages.
- Students enter this school at the start of Year 9 and by the end of the year some have made good progress in developing their knowledge and understanding of the topics studied. However, too few opportunities exist in this year for students to develop and refine their analytical and discursive writing skills so that they are consistently challenged and supported to reach the highest levels.
- For the last three years, attainment at GCSE and in the sixth form has shown some improvement. However, during this period, results at both key stages have fluctuated and improvements have not been consistent.

- Students on examination courses are challenged in their work and they enjoy the courses. When given the opportunity in lessons to discuss and debate, students in all key stages explain their ideas clearly and provide appropriate evidence to support their opinions.
- The development of the full range of students' historical skills is uneven. Younger students are developing effective enquiry skills but they struggled to explain how evidence might be checked for accuracy. Older students were more secure in this. However, their understanding of why people and events are significant in history and why different interpretations must be handled with care, are underdeveloped.
- History makes a good contribution to students' personal development. Students have positive attitudes to learning, behave well in lessons and work well together and on their own. The climate for learning in history is good. The subject is popular and take-up at both GCSE and in the sixth form is good.

Quality of teaching in history

The quality of teaching in history is satisfactory.

- While teaching and the use of assessment to support learning are satisfactory, overall teaching observed was good. However, it has not been sufficiently consistent over time to secure good progress for all students.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge, are enthusiastic about the subject and reflective about their work. Excellent support is now being provided for examination groups. Students appreciate the advice given by teachers and their willingness to provide additional materials and to explain points in a different way to help understanding. This helps to explain the improving results in recent years.
- Lessons are well organised and teachers use a variety of tasks to maintain students' interest and engagement. Younger students noted how much they enjoyed the different ways in which they learnt history, whereas older students commented that they would like to see more variety in their lessons.
- Although learning objectives and success criteria are shared with students, they are not always sufficiently challenging. Opportunities are sometimes missed to structure learning around high-quality evaluative questions which challenge students to think about complex historical issues. Similarly, teachers do not always provide sufficient opportunities for students to consider how the lesson fits into their overarching historical enquiry. This results in missed opportunities for students to deepen their historical understanding.
- Although lessons are usually well-paced, teachers are sometimes too keen to pass on their knowledge to students and try to cover too much. As a result, sufficient opportunities are not provided for students to discuss, reflect upon and debate what they are learning.

- Marking is variable. Where it is most helpful, it provides students with effective guidance. At Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form, students are given detailed advice but, at Key Stage 3, too many comments on students' work lack subject-specific guidance.
- In some lessons, teachers use ongoing assessment skilfully to ensure that students make at least satisfactory progress. However, such effective practice is not yet a consistent feature of teaching in history.

Quality of the curriculum in history

The quality of the curriculum in history is satisfactory.

- The curriculum at Key Stage 3 covers a range of topics. However, it lacks coherence and does not give enough attention to answering key historical questions through enquiries which combine depth, overview and thematic studies and which develop the full range of key historical concepts and processes.
- The curriculum at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form promotes students' academic development well. At A level, students enjoy studying topics which are different from those studied at GCSE.
- Although there are a number of cross-curricular links which help to strengthen provision in history, opportunities to develop students' oral and written literacy, and especially their analytical and discursive writing, are not always exploited.
- Although students benefit from a number of visits to places of historical interest, including the battlefields of Northern France, enrichment opportunities are limited.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in history

The effectiveness of leadership and management in history is satisfactory.

- The head of department is enthusiastic and well motivated. The impact of his effective leadership is seen in the popularity of the subject at both GCSE and A level.
- The subject is well organised and runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis. In this small department, the two teachers work well together. However, the disconnected nature of the Key Stage 3 curriculum means that they do not make the best use of their skills and experiences.
- Self-evaluation is satisfactory and the department is developing a clear picture of its strengths and areas for improvement. For example, the head of department has identified that, at Key Stage 3, the curriculum lacks a coherent framework.
- Curriculum and assessment links with neighbouring middle schools, to ensure that from the start of Year 9 students can make swift progress in their history lessons, are underdeveloped. In addition opportunities to strengthen expertise in the subject by developing partnerships with other high schools and external agencies have not been fully exploited.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- Securing good achievement for all groups of students in lessons and over time, by:
 - ensuring that teaching and the curriculum consistently provide high levels of expectation through increased opportunities for all students to apply their developing historical knowledge to answering challenging historical questions and thereby strengthen their analytical and discursive writing skills
 - further developing teaching strategies to ensure that students are provided with regular opportunities to discuss, reflect upon and debate what they are learning
 - developing assessment practice and feedback at Key Stage 3 to ensure that students are given precise subject-specific advice on how they can improve their work
 - strengthening provision at Key Stage 3 by ensuring that the curriculum covers an appropriate range of topics, through a combination of depth, overview and thematic studies, and develops the full range of key historical concepts and processes
 - establishing closer curriculum and assessment links with neighbouring middle schools to ensure that from the start of Year 9 students can make swift progress in developing their historical knowledge, thinking and understanding.

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

As 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. A copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Michael Maddison
Her Majesty's Inspector