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Mr J Harrison
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Dear Mr Harrison

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: music

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 13 and 14 December 2011 to look at work in music.

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: discussions with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation and analysis of students' work. Six lessons were observed and visits were made to instrumental lessons and ensemble rehearsals. A telephone discussion was also held with the Head of Teaching Development at Kent Music School.

The overall effectiveness of music is inadequate.

Achievement in music

Achievement in music is inadequate.

- Significant weaknesses in teaching and in the curriculum result in standards which are below average by the end of Key Stage 3. The development of students' musical skills and ability to apply musical knowledge to different aspects of learning are weak. Singing is a more regular feature of lessons than in previous years; however, too much emphasis remains on keyboard work. Although satisfactory progress is made in some lessons, students make inadequate progress overall by the end of Year 9, given their general and musical abilities on entry to the school.

- Standards at GCSE have risen during the last three years, and were above average in 2011. Achievement is satisfactory in Key Stage 4, with performing work showing good attention to musical nuances and phrasing. However, achievement is no better than satisfactory because of weaknesses in listening work and because not enough students attain the highest grades that should be expected of them.
- Students studying music technology at A-level make satisfactory progress and the vast majority complete the course. Underperformance in the written examination, especially at A2, prevented progress from being better than satisfactory in 2011. The school's monitoring suggests that current Year 12 and 13 students are all making at least satisfactory progress.
- The proportion of students participating in additional instrumental lessons and/or extra-curricular activities has increased significantly since October 2009, but is still too low, given the school's context. Although singing in the school musical is popular and there is a choir for boys in Years 7 to 9, there is no choir that meets regularly for older students.

Quality of teaching in music

The quality of teaching in music is inadequate.

- Students make inadequate progress in too many lessons because expectations are too low, particularly in Key Stage 3 and for those who are more able. In addition, too much time is spent by both teachers and students measuring their work inappropriately. Targets are concerned more with increasing technical difficulty, rather than on improving the musical quality of students' work.
- In some lessons, particularly in the examination classes, students are encouraged and taught how to make musical connections between pieces of music theory and to use assessment criteria effectively when evaluating their own and others' work. Consequently they are able to make improvements successfully. Students support each other well in lessons, especially when working in ensembles, and they respond quickly to the teacher's instructions.
- These positive features are, however, not evident consistently, especially in Key Stage 3 lessons. Some lessons are over-directed by teachers. Questioning is sometimes superficial and does not allow students to make musical connections or expand their answers. Teachers' subject knowledge is not always secure and, consequently, some explanations lack clarity.

Quality of the curriculum in music

The quality of the curriculum in music is inadequate.

- The commercial scheme of work used for students in Years 7 to 9 has not been adapted sufficiently to reflect students' academic and musical ability. The same lessons are taught, unaltered, to all classes within year groups and consequently they do not meet individuals' needs.

- Curriculum planning follows the examination syllabus for students in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form, thus ensuring that all requirements are covered. Additional material has been added to make sure that the listening paper, currently the weakest aspect, receives more attention than formerly.
- Students report that they welcome the opportunity to participate in additional instrumental ensembles and several small groups rehearse together out of lesson time. Senior leaders have rightly recognised the need to build on the expanding range of ensemble opportunities for boys who have only just started to learn to play an instrument.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in music

The effectiveness of leadership and management in music is inadequate.

- Since taking up post, the head of department has improved students' involvement in music activities and their enjoyment of the subject. Concerts are promoted widely and are well-supported by students and their parents and carers. The recent successful school musical, 'Our House', is testament to this. Improvements in outcomes at Key Stage 4 give confidence in the school's capacity to bring about further improvements. Information about students' involvement in music activities is collected when they join in Year 7 and regular departmental meetings are held. Music staff provide regular self-evaluation documents and monitor students' progress during their GCSE and A-level courses.
- However, despite this considerable amount of monitoring, leaders have not interrogated the information with sufficient rigour to identify and eradicate the causes of underachievement. They have not identified how the curriculum should be adapted to meet the needs of all students, particularly the more able. There is no long-term strategic direction for the department.
- Partnerships have been established with other local schools so that students can study music courses in the sixth form. There are also regular links with instrumental staff from Kent Music School.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the progress made by all students, ensuring that they reach their potential by:
 - adapting the curriculum for students in Years 7 to 9 so that their musical skills, including singing, are developed systematically and appropriately to their high abilities
 - raising teachers' expectation of all students, but especially of the more able, and of their musical capabilities in lessons
 - enabling students to develop and expand their musical explanations in lessons so that they understand how to make improvements

- ensuring that senior leaders support and challenge the music department effectively by:
 - identifying and questioning carefully any potential underachievement, particularly in Key Stage 3
 - ensuring that staff make better use of assessment information with regard to students' previous music involvement and their interests, including their involvement in national music initiatives
 - establishing long-term musical priorities for the department including additional opportunities for all students to make music together.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop music 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

Marianne Young
Her Majesty's Inspector