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Mr J Howard-Drake
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Dear Mr Howard-Drake

Ofsted subject inspection programme – Music

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 13 and 14 November 2006 to look at work in music.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the extent to which every pupil is benefiting from your music provision. In particular, it sought to explore the links you may have developed with other schools and agencies, such as the local Music Service or other professional musicians, in order to improve continuity and increase opportunity for all your pupils.

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 unless to highlight exceptional practice. In such circumstances the school would be contacted prior to publication to agree the exact wording. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of five lessons and an extra-curricular rehearsal.

The overall effectiveness of music was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards in music are satisfactory overall.

- Overall standards attained by students in Key Stage 3 meet national expectations. Almost all students are receptive, collaborate well, have positive attitudes and enjoy their work.
- Students in Key Stage 3 make satisfactory progress overall although progress is not consistent across all classes.
- Results in the GCSE examinations for the last three years have been above average. More students are now studying music in Years 10 and 11. However, while students are making good progress in performing, compositions are not developed as far as they could be.
- In the sixth form, results have been slightly below average. Students observed during the inspection made good progress in music technology when comparing acoustic and synthesised performances of a Brandenburg Concerto.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory overall.

- While there is some good teaching, there is a lack of consistency across all lessons. The most effective teaching is well organised and focuses on active music making. Helpful feedback is provided for students as a result of effective assessment. In these lessons students make good progress.
- However, while teaching is generally well planned, it is occasionally over prescriptive which stifles students' creativity. Sometimes there is insufficient emphasis on listening critically when musical notation is used. In a minority of lessons, teaching is not well organised and, as a result, students do not make adequate progress.

Quality of the music curriculum and extra-curricular provision

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- The scheme of work for Key Stage 3 is broad and balanced although there are insufficient opportunities for singing in Years 8 and 9.
- The curriculum in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form meets the differing needs of students. The range of provision in the sixth form is especially good. These opportunities make a good contribution to students' career and life opportunities.
- The curriculum is enhanced by a satisfactory range of extra-curricular activities and a good range of instrumental lessons.
- Although accommodation is good there are not enough small spaces for students to make music without being affected by sound made by others. The school has experienced difficult financial challenges which have affected the quality of resources, especially those for ICT, which are in need of repair or updating.

Leadership and management

The quality of leadership and management are satisfactory overall and there is good capacity for improvement. Effective steps are being taken to improve the music provision but the full impact of these actions has yet to be seen.

- The school has a clear vision for music which is the third subject in its specialist school designation. As part of its intention to broaden access and raise standards new policies and practices have been introduced. As a result of its self-evaluation the school has identified inconsistencies in the implementation of these initiatives and is addressing them.
- Good progress has been made in a number of areas such as widening the choice of instrumental lessons and increasing the numbers of students studying music at GCSE and in the sixth form.
- The school knows the subject area well, and has identified strengths and areas for concern. It is taking positive action to address weaknesses, including those in teaching and learning.

Subject issues: Data collection and Partnerships

- The school has good systems for tracking students' attainment and progress as they move through the school. There are informal systems for collecting information about students' interests and previous experiences when they join the school. A more comprehensive and formal system is to be introduced in September 2007.
- The school has a number of links with organisations such as local retailers and recording studios. However, there are no formal links with feeder schools or other secondary schools. The school recognises that this is not adequate and has identified appropriate action in its specialist school plan.

Inclusion

- The school provides a satisfactory music education for all students. It is working systematically to improve the quality of its provision. Numbers studying music after the age of 14 have increased and there has been a significant increase in the number of boys. A review of provision has resulted in the re-drafting of the scheme of work for Key Stage 3 and the identification of effective teaching and learning strategies to ensure a more consistent approach for all students.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- achieving greater consistency in the quality of planning and organisation
- engaging students more actively in their own learning and ensuring listening skills are developed when musical notation is used
- enhancing the quality of resources, including provision for ICT
- developing the range and breadth of partnerships.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop music in the school. As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority/Local Learning and Skills Council and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

David Williams
Additional Inspector