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Mr S Hyden
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Dear Mr Hyden

Ofsted survey inspection programme – history

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 25 and 26 February 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 development of students' skills in literacy.

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. 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 learners and staff, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are outstanding.

- From broadly average levels of prior attainment on entry to the school, learners make outstanding progress and reach above-average standards in their GCSE examinations at the end of Year 11. History is consistently one of the highest performing subjects in this high-performing school.
- In Key Stage 3, students are generally articulate and most can use subject terminology accurately and in context. High levels of challenge in lessons lead to students acquiring historical skills at a rapid rate, and

learners in Year 9, for example, already have a perceptive view of the nature of bias.

- Excellent achievement continues in Years 10 and 11 and students' skills in literacy, particularly in essay writing and in the formulation of a balanced argument, sometimes belie their years. They demonstrate impressive background knowledge of the topics under consideration, for example when they talk convincingly about the reasons for the rise of Hitler in the 1930s.
- Students make good progress in the sixth form and standards at Advanced Level are rising.
- History is a very popular subject in school and the numbers of students opting for examination study at GCSE level are significantly higher than usually found. Students enjoy history, see the value of it and have the highest regard for their teachers. They are aware that the skills they are acquiring, including the evaluation of evidence, will stand them in good stead for the future. Indeed, they add that their historical skills help them in other subjects. Their behaviour in lessons is impeccable and they are fully engaged in their studies.

Quality of teaching and learning in history

The quality of teaching and learning is outstanding.

- In the words of their students, 'Our teachers are dedicated and they love history.' Indeed, teachers have a most secure knowledge of their subject and pass their enthusiasm for history onto their students.
- Comprehensive planning, excellent relationships and an overriding concern to meet the needs and interests of all their students are the characteristics of teaching within the department. Teachers have high expectations of what the students can do and modify their methods to ensure that individual learning needs are met. Students believe lessons are fun and enjoy the many opportunities they have to take part in historical drama, debates and discussions. They rise to the challenge of their teachers and are delighted to express their opinions and justify their views with evidence. The best lessons develop as a dialogue between students and between students and the teacher.
- All teachers within the department use the electronic whiteboard as a teaching and learning tool with consummate skill. In addition, they prepare thought-provoking resources for their students, including detailed revision booklets.
- Assessment is of high quality and teachers monitor the progress of their students with the utmost rigour, intervening rapidly if underachievement is apparent. On rare occasions, students' progress is underestimated and teachers are now working towards a more formal analysis of achievement in Key Stage 3.
- Academic guidance is excellent and students have a keen understanding of their current performance and of how to reach their challenging targets. Students also benefit from a variety of extra classes, revision sessions and individual tuition. As they comment, 'Our teachers encourage us and are always there to help.'

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is outstanding.

- The curriculum meets statutory requirements and is an ideal balance between the story of history and students' acquisition of historical skills. As a result, more and more students wish to study history and they reach consistently above average standards in the subject.
- Schemes of work are always under review and teachers work hard to provide courses, which interest students of all ability levels. Topics build on previous learning and also ensure that students see the links between history and other subjects.
- There is a wide range of extra-curricular activities and students and students benefit from a variety of visits and visitors. Trips to Berlin and to the battlefields of Belgium are key features and sixth form students enjoy their university lectures on Elizabethan England and aspects of Russian history. In addition, students' empathy with the victims of the Third Reich is reinforced by their discussions with Holocaust survivors. Revision clubs before school prepare students very well for external examinations and the use of email and text messages reminds students of the content they need to research and of the skills they must practise. As students in Year 7 say, 'History in our school isn't just about the classroom!' Sixth formers agree and add, 'We opted for history because the department offers so much more than just lessons'.

Leadership and management of history

The leadership and management of history are outstanding.

- The head of department is also head of the humanities faculty and has responsibility for aspects of the new whole-school Key Stage 3 curriculum. He leads the area by good example and is supported very well by a committed and talented team of teachers.
- The analysis, interrogation and evaluation of progress data are major strengths and the ongoing evaluation of departmental performance is both honest and accurate. As a consequence, areas for development are well founded, standards remain consistently high and students make outstanding progress in their study of history.
- Decisions are taken after detailed research, extensive consultation and with the personal and academic well-being of students always in mind. Staff are held accountable for the performance of their students and focused lesson observations lead to the sharing of good practice and to the ongoing improvement in teaching and learning.
- Resources produced by the department are of high quality and demonstrate teachers' outstanding specialist knowledge and pedagogical skills. They also reflect the high levels of commitment and enthusiasm within the department. Teamwork is of the essence and teachers support each other willingly and with eagerness.

Subject issue: literacy in history

- The department takes the development of students' literacy skills very seriously and emphasises the importance of extended writing and the accurate use of historical terminology from as early as Year 7.
- Students' speaking skills are developed very effectively by the use of drama, group work and oral presentations. Teachers foster debate and encourage their students to express their opinions, but also to justify them with relevant evidence.
- Teachers place great emphasis on preparing students for the rigour of written examinations. By the use of very well prepared support material, they make sure that students' skills in essay writing are developed to the full.
- Students recognise that the development of their skills in literacy can benefit their progress in other subjects too. They are fully aware that the production of an ordered and convincing argument is not just the preserve of the study of history.

Inclusion

- The department believes in mixed-ability teaching and the support for students of all capabilities is a strong area of its work. Students themselves say that the support and guidance from their teachers is outstanding, irrespective of their levels of ability.
- Standards in GCSE examinations over time demonstrate that students of all levels of ability make outstanding progress. Impressive numbers reach grades A and A* and very few fail to attain a grade.
- Teachers work hard to ensure that all students who take history in the sixth form can benefit from studying at Advanced Level.

There are no significant areas for improvement but we discussed:

- the establishment of more formal arrangements to ensure the accuracy of teacher assessments in Key Stage 3.

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

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Jim Kidd
Additional Inspector