

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mrs P Cornish
Headteacher
Saddleworth School
High Street
Uppermill
Oldham
Greater Manchester
OL3 6BU

Dear Mrs Cornish

Ofsted survey inspection programme – history

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 17 and 18 November 2008 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 information and communication technology (ICT) in history and on provision for gifted and talented history students.

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 staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of lessons in all years.

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is good and standards are above average.

- Students make good progress in acquiring and developing historical skills, knowledge and understanding. Students in both Year 9 and Year 11 talk about the meaning and value of history with confidence. Their skills of analysis and evaluation of source material are good and they are fully aware why evidence cannot always be trusted to tell an accurate story of the past.
- Students in Year 7 know the differences between primary and secondary evidence and give convincing examples of both from the topics they are studying.

- Students in all years show creativity in their work and produce, for example, thought-provoking propaganda cartoons, newspaper reports, diaries of First World War soldiers and historical games. They use historical terminology accurately and in context.
- Over time, standards at GCSE have been above and on occasions, well above average. In 2007 and 2008, all students obtained a grade, and the percentage attaining at grades A* or A continues to be broadly average. There is no significant difference in the standards reached by girls and boys.
- Students' personal development is outstanding. They behave impeccably in history lessons, are fully engaged in the subject-matter and are opting for GCSE courses in ever-increasing numbers. They have a high regard for their teachers and enjoy the challenge offered by them. The department recognises, however, that it does not take its students' opinions enough into account when it is evaluating subject performance.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is good and some outstanding teaching was observed during the visit.

- Teachers have expert subject knowledge and plan their lessons and programmes of study meticulously. They have good relations with their students and display high expectations of what they achieve. As a result, there is realistic challenge in lessons and students are required to justify the answers they give.
- Teachers are keen to provide the right balance between the enjoyment of history and the acquisition of historical skills. For example, in an outstanding Year 8 lesson on the murder of Becket, students were challenged to act as history detectives and drew accurate conclusions from complex sources. They were desperate to find the truth and left the lesson eager for more!
- Teachers reinforce learning well by linking lesson content to other eras in history and also to their students' own experiences. Video clips are used effectively to motivate students and to introduce topics.
- Assessment is good and improving rapidly. Teachers gauge students' performance with accuracy and offer them detailed comment on how they may improve their work. Students themselves comment positively about the value of the 'history handbooks' and the 'ladders to success' which, they say, prepare them well for their assignments, and give them further information on how to improve.
- On occasions, teachers miss opportunities to involve their students in paired and group work and sometimes there is a little too much teacher direction of activities.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is good.

- The curriculum meets statutory requirements and comprises a range of topics and modules which enthuse students and helps to develop their historical skills well. Students have many opportunities for personal research and use the history department website extensively when writing their assignments.
- The Key Stage 3 scheme of work has been completely revised and the new scheme is a thorough document. The department has taken the opportunity to introduce a local study element and there is a greater emphasis than before on cross-curricular links and skills-based assessment.
- The Key Stage 3 programme is popular among students overall but does not always meet the needs of those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- Over time, greater numbers of more able students are opting to study history at GCSE.
- The department is rightly proud of its trips to Styal Mill and to the battlefields of the two world wars because they lead to impressive assignments by students. However, there are insufficient enrichment activities to make sure that students maintain their love of history outside the classroom.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of history are good.

- The subject leader is both talented and creative, leads the area by consultation and example, and is well supported by a team of teachers who are committed to the department and to the students in their care. The subject leader has already had a considerable impact on developing assessment in history, on the modification of the Key Stage 3 curriculum and on the use of ICT.
- Departmental self-evaluation is rigorous and accurate and there is appropriate emphasis on the analysis of performance data, on the quality of teaching and learning and on the scrutiny of pupils' work.
- The department runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis and the teaching and resources produced by teachers are of high quality.

Subject issue: ICT

The use of ICT in history is good.

- The use of ICT by both teachers and students is improving. Electronic whiteboards in each classroom are used effectively to strengthen learning and the department benefits from being able to access one of the school's computer suites.

- The use of video clips is a regular element of teaching and learning and students produce creative assignments using a wide range of software packages.
- There is an impressive history website within the school's Intranet and students speak highly, for example, of the variety of information they can access when producing their GCSE coursework.

Subject issue: provision for gifted and talented history students

The provision for gifted history students is satisfactory.

- The department has produced a register of gifted history students and the battlefield tour is designed to reinforce their historical skills further.
- The new Key Stage 3 programme provides detailed advice on how teachers can challenge gifted history students.
- GCSE teaching challenges students of higher ability but there are few assignments specifically for gifted history students.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- modifying the Key Stage 4 programme to meet needs of lower-attaining students more closely
- involving students more directly within the departmental evaluation of performance
- developing more enrichment activities to promote students' love of history outside the classroom.

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