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Mr A Dare
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Dear Mr Dare

Ofsted survey inspection programme – history

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 19 and 20 March 2009 to look at work in history.

As outlined in our initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subjects, the visit had a particular focus on information and communication technology (ICT) in history and provision for gifted 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, a scrutiny of relevant data and documentation, an analysis of students' work and the observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is good and standards are average. From below average starting points, students progress well.

- The range of achievement is wide with some students demonstrating outstanding progress. In both Key Stages 3 and 4, students increasingly, and sometimes rapidly, learn to evaluate sources, support the evaluations with contextual knowledge, and communicate their judgements effectively. Improvement is particularly strong in Years 7 and 8.
- Students' work in history demonstrates increasing fluency in listening, reading and writing, thus fulfilling one of the subject's cross-curricular

aims to develop students' literacy skills. There were numerous examples in all lessons visited of students being assisted in the structuring of their writing including responding to mock examination questions. One weakness, however, is the quality of handwriting and presentation.

- The subject makes an excellent contribution to students' personal development. Students' self-confidence is developing well as they improve their performance in basic skills. Their political, social and moral awareness is also developing well through the study of topics such as the Holocaust and social conditions in 19th century Britain.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is judged to be good.

- Teachers know the subject very well and they teach it confidently. They are committed to their students and are keen for them to do well.
- An important, recent innovation has been an increased focus on students being more involved in the assessment of their own work and this has strengthened learning.
- Teachers respond well to meeting the needs of the wide range of ability in history classes. For example, the sensitive guidance given by teachers in the mixed ability classes in Years 10 and 11 supports students effectively. The introduction of setting in Years 7 and 8 has helped teachers to be more focussed in their planning.
- The history department meets its aim of 'ensuring that teaching is good in all major respects and exemplary in significant elements'. There are a good number of ways in which it is exemplary but a significant one is the way in which teachers manage to get students to understand quite complex historical issues and their consequences.
- The quality of display of students' work in classrooms is exceptional and has a very positive effect on their attitudes and self-confidence.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is judged to be satisfactory.

- The current Key Stage 3 curriculum provides a satisfactory basis for the development of students' knowledge and understanding of history. However, it provides a good basis for the development of historical and other skills.
- The current curriculum does not sufficiently address the requirements of the new National Curriculum in terms of content as well as the intent to make history more meaningful to students by establishing clear links between discrete topics and relevance to the present.
- The recent introduction of a two-year Key Stage 3 has led to a reduction in what is covered by the course, principally aspects of British history, but teachers have worked well to accommodate this. However, there are plans to reduce, further, the time available for the subject. This raises significant concerns about the purpose of history in the school overall and whether the National Curriculum in history can be taught and learnt properly.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of history are judged to be good.

- The head of history has been successful in establishing a good working relationship between all teachers in the department.
- The department is alert to current developments and keen to improve where necessary.
- All staff have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of students. However, not all data which would help with self-evaluation of the overall performance of the department is easily available to teachers.

Subject issue: ICT

The use of ICT in history is good.

- ICT is used successfully throughout the curriculum in different ways. For example, virtual tours of Ancient Rome are provided in Years 7 and 10 and to the Western Front in Year 8. Material from a commercial website is used with younger students to provide an interview with William the Conqueror and to support an enquiry into Jack the Ripper. Relevant interactive games are also used.
- Interactive whiteboards are used effectively by both staff and students, notably 'drag and drop' activities, and in Year 11, the department is piloting the use of PSPs (Play Station Portables) to support source analysis.
- Students have access to homework and other materials through the 'Rucksack' on the school's website.
- Staff and students are regular users of PowerPoint including the use of embedded video. There is frequent use of ICT for word processing.

Subject issue: provision for gifted and talented history students

The provision for gifted history students is good.

- The department has recently introduced setting in Years 7 and 8. The arrangement also involves smaller group sizes. This is working well allowing more able students to work faster with higher expectations using more complicated sources.
- In Years 9 to 11, the interests of gifted students are furthered by teaching and learning strategies which enable students to create, for example, model answers for peer assessment. More able students in Years 10 and 11 are also regularly challenged to complete past GCSE papers in 'real time' as homework.
- The use of laptops for gifted students in Year 7 has improved their understanding of the research potential of the internet; for example, by researching examples of good leaders linked to a lesson on claimants to the throne in 1006.

- Cross-curricular enquiry projects, such as the study of the Holocaust, provide opportunities for independent learning.
- Students refer to guidance displayed on classroom walls and success criteria in their exercise books to reflect on their progress and identify strategies to improve.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that the Key Stage 3 curriculum reflects the content and intent of the National Curriculum and that there is sufficient time to teach and learn it properly
- providing the department with data in an appropriate form so that it can judge its overall effectiveness.

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

Paul Armitage
Additional Inspector