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Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages.

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and those of your staff and students, during my visit on 8-9 June 2009 to look at work in modern languages (ML).

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on how information and communication technology (ICT) is being used by teachers and students to improve language learning. It also looked at where you are in reaching the benchmarks for provision in Key Stage 4.

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 nominated staff and two groups of students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML was judged to be good with outstanding features.

Context

The school has been a specialist languages college since 1996. Students enter the school with above average abilities but few in Key Stage 4 have learned a modern language at primary school.

Achievement and standards

Overall, standards are average. Achievement is good.

- In lessons observed, students made good progress and some made outstanding progress.

- Standards at Key Stage 3 in 2008 were above national expectations in German and French, and those in Spanish were well above. However, those in Japanese were well below average. In 2008, nearly half of students gained the higher Level 6 grade in one subject and some 14% gained Level 7. Girls perform more strongly than boys.
- At Key Stage 4 in 2008, students achieved broadly average results in GCSE examinations in French, German and Spanish. However, given that many more students are entered for each of these languages than is the case nationally, this represents good achievement. More able students performed particularly well. In 2008, well over a third achieved the highest grades in French, German and in other languages and just under a third achieved these grades in Spanish.
- Students in the sixth form perform well at A2 and AS level.
- Students' reading and writing skills and their understanding of grammar are developing well. Students have ample opportunities to write at length and to use ICT to draft and redraft work.
- The speaking skills of more able students are well developed, but those of other students are less well advanced, particularly in the European languages. More able students speak confidently and pronunciation is generally good. They are mostly willing learners who are keen to answer questions in the target languages.
- Students' intercultural understanding is good overall. It is stronger in Key Stage 4 and post-16 than in Key Stage 3. Students' understanding of how useful languages can be to their future economic well-being is good, particularly amongst older students. They cited their usefulness for university studies and for careers such as teaching English abroad, translating, code-breaking and business. Those studying Latin appreciated how it could be useful for studying medicine, law or science.
- ML makes a good contribution to students' personal development and well-being and also helps students develop as good global citizens. One student spoke eloquently of how learning languages "breaks down barriers" between peoples and encourages respect of others.

Quality of teaching and learning in ML

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- The quality of teaching is good. During the visit a range of teaching from outstanding to satisfactory was observed.
- Teachers' subject knowledge is very good, as is their pronunciation. There is good use of the target language in lessons and at times this is very good. New vocabulary is modelled well and in the good or better lessons explanations are clear and succinct. Where learning was at its strongest, students' understanding was continually checked up on and pronunciation corrected.
- Planning is generally good and at its best is logical and sequenced. However, there is scope for more emphasis to be given to how work will match students' different abilities.

- Learning objectives are displayed in lessons, but occasionally some students were not clear what they had to do in some activities. A good range of activities is used to motivate students and useful links are also made in lessons with other subjects, such as mathematics.
- Good use is made of language learning strategies to help students understand new learning. In a very good Japanese lesson students were tasked with devising visual ways by which new letter characters could be remembered.
- In most lessons, students' prior knowledge is drawn upon and lessons usually conclude with a plenary session whereby new learning is reinforced. Questioning is often, but not always, used well to check that new learning has been understood and retained.
- There is variation in how well marking moves students on.
- Additional adults work well in lessons. In one lesson for less able students, they successfully ensured that students who exhibited challenging behaviour stayed on task.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding

- All students study French in Key Stage 3 and the great majority study a second language. The very good range of range of languages which students can choose from includes Spanish, German, Japanese and Chinese. More able students can also opt to study Latin.
- All students take GCSE examinations in languages. The school has plans to adopt alternative accreditation for its least able students.
- Most students in Key Stage 4 continue with a language. There is good provision for those who wish to study a second language. Recently, the proportion of those doing so, currently around 15%, has declined, despite the best efforts of the school to encourage a greater uptake.
- All students in Year 12 study a language and sit a vocational qualification in it. In addition, to the languages taught at Key Stage 4, students can also opt to study Italian. Year 12 students who continue with a language they have previously learned are able to take a higher level of qualification than those who study a language new to them. The very good choice of languages at post-16 was cited by some students new to the school as a key factor in their choice of sixth form.
- The time provided for languages learning is good.
- Additional classes are held in which underachievement can be tackled and students can attend a homework club for assistance with their studies. There are few extra-curricular clubs due to the dependence of many students on school buses and the brevity of the lunch hour. However, a German club offers students good opportunities to be creative in their learning, such as making a video.
- There is a very good range of longstanding exchange visits and trips to France, Germany, Spain and Japan which contribute strongly to students' intercultural understanding and personal development. Theatre visits, such as one to a German language play and events,

such as the European Day of Languages and a German Christmas Fair, further enhance the curriculum. The school's involvement as a leading school in the Confucius Classroom project has also enabled it to extend its students' understanding well of Chinese culture.

- Students have opportunities to watch foreign films which develop their listening skills. There is a good departmental website which is well used by students.
- Good links with other subject departments enhance learning. For example, history teachers have taught lessons in French and French teachers have taught key aspects of history in French lessons.

Leadership and management of ML

Leadership and management are good.

- You and the senior leadership team are very supportive of ML, ensuring that it is well resourced.
- Subject leadership is good. The Head of Languages has drawn up a detailed and extensive self-evaluation of the faculty's effectiveness and it is broadly accurate. She has worked hard to develop the uptake of languages and to increase the number of dual linguists at Key Stage 4.
- Students' work and teaching and learning are regularly monitored and appropriate feedback is given to staff.
- Training is thoughtfully considered and draws on a range of providers, although no full audit of teachers' training needs has been undertaken.
- Data are well used to track students' progress and to identify those who are in need of extra support in the run up to examinations.
- The department's broad curriculum has been successfully maintained, despite some recent discontinuity in staffing. Alternative accreditation is planned to meet the needs more fully of less able students in Key Stage 3 and encourage them to continue studying languages.
- Leadership of the language specialism is very good. The specialism has made a strong contribution to the enrichment of the curriculum and the school's outreach work. It works closely with 12 key feeder primary schools and two staff deliver a variety of languages in them. As a result, many students entering the school now have experience of ML and this is taken into consideration when language sets are formed. Training is planned to help primary teachers further develop their own language skills. An assessment booklet has also been developed for use with these primary schools. The school has supported another secondary school in delivering ML and has facilitated its outreach work.
- Training has been held for teaching assistants, including those from other schools, to develop their skills in working in language lessons with students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- The specialism has been proactive in promoting links between other departments and schools abroad. For example, it has facilitated work between the design and technology department and a Polish school.
- Daytime classes are held for members of the local community and teaching assistants can attend these to develop their language skills.

How close the school is to reaching the benchmarks for language take-up in Key Stage 4

The school exceeds the higher benchmark of 90% for language take-up in Key Stage 4.

How well is ICT used by teachers and students to improve language learning?

This is good.

- ICT contributes well to students' enjoyment of learning languages. Interactive whiteboards were used in all lessons observed, and students had some opportunities to use them. They are used well to introduce new vocabulary, explain learning objectives, test understanding and to add variety to lessons.
- The languages faculty is well resourced with a computer suite and a new digital audio suite that is used to promote speaking and listening.
- Electronic hand-held assessment technology is well used in Japanese lessons to enliven learning and to assess progress in a swift and efficient way from which students could also benefit.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- developing a closer match of work to the abilities of students
- strengthening the academic guidance which students receive, including marking
- developing intercultural understanding and understanding of the usefulness of languages at Key Stage 3.

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

Yours sincerely

Michael McIlroy
Her Majesty's Inspector