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Dear Mrs Harrison

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Creative Learning

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 17-18 November 2008 to look at creative learning.

As outlined in my initial letter, the visit had a particular focus on the ways in which you develop creative learning and the impact this is having on achievement and standards and on students' personal development.

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 the observation of eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of how the school promotes creativity was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Opportunities for creative learning make an outstanding contribution to the high levels of enjoyment experienced by students. For the many very able students in the school, creativity is a key aspect of what makes school interesting and challenging. Students collaborate very well with each other and with staff, particularly when undertaking creative activity in competitive situations. The school has used its science specialism creatively to promote students' personal development. This contributes to the outstanding achievement and the exceptionally high standards in virtually all subjects.

High levels of technical expertise are evident in art, where the majority of students gain the highest grades possible.

Quality of teaching and learning in respect of this aspect

The contribution of teaching to creative learning is good. Teachers ask a wide range of questions that result in pupils thinking more deeply. Teachers consistently take account of students' preferred learning styles, for instance by encouraging students to present their ideas in a variety of ways, including through information and communication technology (ICT).

There are promising signs that steps are being taken to ensure students experience even more consistently challenging creative activity in lessons. Some teachers are adopting a more rigorous approach by ensuring reference to thinking skills. For instance a teacher used different thinking hats to encourage a more analytical review of learning. Staff also use subject related criteria in peer and self-assessment to increase challenge. Year 9's independent learning day was effective because the students had a very clear deadline within which to complete a task. Students are less enthusiastic about some collaborative activity because outcomes involving high standards and creativity were not emphasised. For instance, although students make confident presentations they are not always encouraged to consider information critically and include succinct conclusions.

Quality of the curriculum

The school's largely academic curriculum is well matched to the needs of students and makes an outstanding contribution to their creative development. Independent learning days very successfully involve students in stimulating and creative challenges in realistic contexts. Work experience also contributes to this. Within subjects many opportunities for project work are identified, usually culminating in a presentation of findings. These promote collaboration and the development of leadership skills.

GCSE citizenship taken by a majority of students provides very good opportunities for students to be creatively involved in organising charity events. Every student in Year 11 undertakes the Sports Leadership level 1 course and is involved in the coaching of younger students. Extra-curricular opportunities are very extensive, in part owing to the leadership provided by sixth formers. A particularly noteworthy feature is the sixth-form mentoring of Year 7 and Year 8 students who have relative weaknesses in literacy. Students are creative in developing a range of strategies to engage younger students. A rigorous application procedure further enhances the personal development associated with this initiative. Creative thinking and problem-solving in the school council has been boosted by the identification of a budget that students now manage.

Leadership and management

The impact of leadership and management on creative learning is outstanding. There is a well established shared vision in the school that has

resulted in a variety of approaches to learning becoming well established. School development planning indicates the school is clear about how it will improve further through increasing opportunities for creative ways of learning. Self-review is accurate and now more actively involves middle leadership. Joint observations with members of the senior leadership team have greatly enhanced the expertise of middle leaders who are now much more aware of the need to develop student independence and creativity. The emphasis on the use of 'success criteria' to highlight exceptional outcomes to students is proving to be a highly effective way of promoting creativity.

Very good use is made of the expertise of staff, including those who do not teach. The director of specialism, for example, helps ensure that a creative approach permeates the whole school.

Equality and diversity

Assessment information is used well so timely interventions can be made in response to any under-achievement. The school has improved the achievement of students who have English as an additional language. The diverse backgrounds of students are increasingly reflected in the ideas considered in lessons.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- continuing to promote creativity and higher level thinking when developing success criteria with students.

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 the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Kevin Sheldrick
Her Majesty's Inspector