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Dear Mr Hunter

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Art and design

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 9 and 10 June 2009 to evaluate your work in art and design.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the impact of the new secondary subject curriculum that challenges you to develop students who 'think and act like artists, craftworkers and designers, working creatively and intelligently'.

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 senior staff, the subject leader and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work, observations of four lessons and a visit to the GCSE exhibition at Castleton Visitor's Centre.

Art and design

Overall effectiveness was judged outstanding.

Achievement and standards in art and design

Achievement and standards are outstanding overall.

- Students make excellent progress in the subject from the start. Their sketchbooks in Year 7 show a breadth of ideas, experiments and depth of understanding. For example, linked to an analysis of the artist Mark Rothko, students explore colour mixing through a variety of art media

including a range of paints and translucent papers. Whilst their progress is less marked in Year 8 students nevertheless build a wide repertoire of skills they are able to select, apply or pursue in greater depth as their ideas and confidence develops through Key Stage 3.

- During Years 7 to 9 boys and girls of all abilities make discerning decisions as they work on a range of scales, in two and three-dimensions, striving for originality. Discussion with a group of students revealed that 'imagination, observation and expression' were key subject skills and 'patience, commitment and independence' key personal skills they considered underpinned their most successful work.
- The subject is a very popular examination option. The proportion of boys and girls taking an art and design examination is well above average. Some start the course having already achieved a GCSE in Graphics in Year 9 or worked towards the Arts Council Arts Award. Students taking other options such as GCSE Textiles also make effective use of their grounding in surface pattern and construction developed in the Key Stage 3 art and design course.
- At GCSE the proportion of students achieving A\*-A grades is consistently well above the national average. Whilst the performance of girls in 2008 slipped to broadly average results, boys continued to do better than nationally. Current work indicates that boys and girls are back on track to achieve challenging targets in the subject. An outstanding feature of their achievement is the diversity of ideas and art media they use to express their creativity, drawing on the work of contemporary artists, craftworkers and designers selectively.
- The quality of students' observation and their analysis, criticism and interpretation of the work of others is a variable aspect of their work. Nevertheless, discussion with students taking an examination in the subject revealed a secure understanding of the value of the subject in relation to careers and personal development evolved from their work with practising artists, visits to galleries or personal reflection. Some students extended their interest effectively out of school by, for example, exhibiting photography in the House of Commons through the 'Young Farmers' initiative or through visiting galleries independently.

## Quality of teaching and learning in art and design

The impact of teaching on learning is outstanding overall.

- A significant quality of the teaching is the ability of one subject teacher to inspire and manage a diverse range of learning within lessons and across different year groups. Keeping up to date about developments in art education and the art world through her work as a teacher and practising artist has a very positive impact on the relevance and unpredictability of lessons, which the students value highly.
- The impact of teaching on learning is maximised by skilled deployment of technician support and in some lessons particularly able or enthusiastic students to lead the learning through demonstration or exemplary work. Support staff reinforce the work of the subject expert well by working closely with students who find learning difficult, learning from the clarity of teacher objectives and demonstration.

Displays presented with flair also contribute to students' understanding that technical skill combined with creativity is a consistent expectation.

- The inspection coincided with the mentoring of a teacher in training. This added to available subject expertise and the network of information and experience to draw on, establishing the subject teacher's principles and practice firmly. This is also evident in ongoing collaboration with other arts and technology staff, the contribution of art and design remaining distinctive. Secure subject knowledge is evident in the frequent use of technical vocabulary by staff and students and the teachers' confidence in setting open-ended challenges, not afraid to address the variety of responses this approach provokes.
- Students are given clear guidance in lessons, through regular assessments and frank reports. Their knowledge of assessment objectives is particularly good in Years 10 and 11. In a Year 10 lesson observed a subtle reference to examination objectives was made during students' playful experimentation with clay, adding to the purpose and rigour of the activity. The teacher exploited her rapport with the group and avoided an over emphasis on teacher talk by inviting a student to make the link for the group between opportunities to explore materials inventively with specific, longer term objectives.
- Information and communication technology (ICT) is used most effectively to illustrate examples of relevant artists' work at key points. Whilst students are not always good listeners, when the stimulus is introduced judiciously they are attentive, inquisitive and enthusiastic to relate their own experience. Students are given sound guidance about how to interrogate the work of others but this is an area where a wider range of strategies could promote more progression. Nevertheless, a very effective strategy involved students in seeking the views of their families about particular works of art.

## Quality of the curriculum in art and design

The curriculum in art and design is outstanding.

- The breadth of media available is a strength, enabling individual students to revisit two, three and digital media on a regular basis through the structuring of the curriculum. Progression is thoughtfully planned through a series of emphases in each year starting with 'foundation' through to 'exploration' and 'refinement' before 'birth of an artist', encouraging personal style at GCSE. Whilst the majority of work is aesthetic in purpose, more vocational options are planned through the development of the BTEC and the Creative and Media Diploma.
- Linked to the breadth of media are a wide range of references to different artists, craftworkers and designers. These are successful in meeting the interests of boys and girls with varying experience of art related activities out of school. Whilst some local references are made there could be more. However, students are given many opportunities to explore work created by different cultures in different places. Contemporary and C20th work is represented well but historical references are less common.
- Gallery visits in Year 8 and Year 10 are thoughtfully timed and structured to maximise their impact on students' progress and

achievement. In Year 8 visits to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Liverpool and Manchester galleries have related clearly to school based follow-up. In Year 10 the residential arts experience based in London is a significant turning point, heightening students' creative aspirations. Their ideas broaden in response to first hand experience of different artists' work, including controversial and transient experiences.

- Work with practising artists complements and adds to the skills of the subject teacher besides supporting students in their breadth of thinking. For example, an animation project supported by an artist with direct experience of working in the creative industries inspired students to work in depth, using the high quality resources available to good effect.
- Subject matter is suitably wide ranging. However, students evaluated the most provocative stimuli the most conceptually based. For example, in Year 7 'the rough and the smooth' printmaking project and in Year 10 'structures' courseworks set students off in a range of directions, whereas they considered 'Indian art' more constraining. Creative sketchbook work in response to 'lost and found' adds to the evidence that opportunities to develop imagination are welcomed.

## Leadership and management of art and design

The leadership and management of art and design are outstanding.

- The subject leader's outward-looking perspective ensures that despite students' track record of above average performance, targets continue to rise, informed by effective links with local and national arts and educational communities. Significantly, potential challenges, for example to students' breadth and depth of experience associated with the small size of the department, are overcome by skilful management and creative use of resources.
- Inclusion is a strong aspect of subject leadership. Older students in particular expressed the view that the art department is a special place in which their diverse ideas are nurtured and expressed without fear of ridicule. Whilst some decisions conform to whole school or wider expectations designed to ensure consistency for students, where possible approaches are adapted, reviewed and remodelled in response to students' individual reactions and needs.
- The vision for the subject achieves an excellent balance between satisfying examination objectives and striving for students' individual creativity. Many able students capable of success across a wide range of other subjects ensure nevertheless that pursuing art and design remains a priority due to the personal development experienced.
- The school's specialist subjects that include the arts and technology enjoy excellent links, both explicit and implicit. Collaborative performances or projects are only part of the relationship that matters to the students. For example, students are able to use the strong emphasis on expressive mark-making in art and design and technically crafted approach to design work developed in graphics, to good effect.
- Monitoring and evaluation is well informed by critical analysis of students' achievements and structured opportunities for students and

parents to express their views. Documentary evidence of subject self-evaluation is underdeveloped and does not do justice to the clarity about strengths and weaknesses that are otherwise evident. Whilst this does not restrict curriculum collaboration it does limit the impact of the subject on whole school innovation or improvement planning.

Subject issue: the impact of provision on students' ability to 'think and act like artists, working creatively and intelligently'

This is good.

- Clear account has been taken of the significant changes to the secondary art and design curriculum in Key Stage 3 and further development is planned. Assessment approaches have been adjusted to improve students' understanding of the new levels, including the greater emphasis on developing creativity.
- Links with other subjects are already established, particularly other art forms and technology. Literacy and ICT are embedded well. Curriculum collaboration across other subjects is an area to strengthen, particularly in relation to developing and applying the key skills associated with different subjects.
- The integration of gallery visits, artist workshops and role of artist/teacher contribute to students' understanding about how different artists think and act. Not all students advance their critical skills in order to deepen the connections between their own work and that of others but the impact of contemporary practice on many is profound.

Examples of exemplary practice, which we discussed, included:

- the breadth of the curriculum leading to high levels of participation and performance by different groups of pupils
- the outward-looking quality of subject leadership leading to decisions well informed by educational and art communities outside school
- the pace of learning and high level of expectation from the start, mark-making in particular, leading to confidence and creativity early on
- the judicious management of resources, including visiting artists and gallery visits leading to continuous stimulation for students and staff.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- develop students' critical skills in analysing how and why different artists, craftworkers and designers think, act and apply their ideas
- develop curriculum innovation, for example to build more immediately on students' excellent progress in Year 7.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop art and design across 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

Ian Middleton  
Her Majesty's Inspector