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Mr R Thomas
Headteacher
Thomas Tallis School
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Dear Mr Thomas

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 18-19 September to look at creative learning.

As outlined in our 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 observations of nine lessons.

The overall effectiveness of the use of creative learning was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Students enter the school with standards that are slightly below average. They achieve well and by the end of Key Stage 4 they are average, showing especially good achievement in Years 10 and 11. The school's strong commitment to creative learning helps students to think for themselves, to work independently, and to apply freely what they have learned in other subjects. From the very start of Year 7 students grow into the idea that they will need to be creative frequently, and that their creativity will be valued.

They become proud to show off their work, and they become more confident learners as a result. Students' personal development is outstanding, and there are clear and documented links between the use of creative tasks, increasing interest, involvement and enthusiasm, and the good or excellent learning that was seen in lessons. Vibrant lessons, in which students' thinking skills are actively promoted, resulted in achievement that was at least good. Creative learning techniques made a significant contribution to the quality of learning because students were active in producing work, and in assessing their own and one another's work against criteria. Total involvement was the norm and progress rapid. The improvement has yet to be reflected in National Curriculum test results, however.

Quality of teaching and learning

Much of the teaching seen over the two days was outstanding, and none was less than good. In the best lessons, the use of cross-curricular links helps to place learning in context, to help students to think in new ways, and often in ways developed in other areas of the curriculum. In every lesson seen, the value placed by the teacher on students' opinions was very high. Even the most reticent students know this, and in most lessons, students frame hypotheses independently or in discussion, take risks, and challenge both their peers and their teachers. A culture of promoting creative learning pervades the school. Imaginative techniques, such as exchanging teachers between subject areas or joint projects between subjects, give lessons a novelty and a buzz of activity as students and teachers alike join in a voyage of discovery. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) makes an excellent contribution to most lessons, and an outstanding contribution in some. In a link with another school, digital production techniques have been used in the filming of a newscast for TallisTV. The availability of professional assistance, and above all a willingness to allow all groups of students to interpret the brief creatively, has resulted in work of fully professional quality, raised students' self-esteem, and helped them to understand that creativity is a vital part of the modern world. In lessons, teachers know the needs of their students, and are able to match the way they teach to those needs. For example, in a Year 7 mathematics lesson on ratio, students were invited to mix red and yellow paints to make a range of hues dependent on the ratio of the two colours. Not only was the teacher well able to manage a class of 11 year-olds with diverse special needs and preconceptions, but she was able to modify her teaching depending on the preferred learning styles of the students she was talking to.

Quality of the curriculum

An outstanding curriculum is clearly enhanced by the school's arts specialism and leading edge status. The emphasis throughout the school is on the every child matters agenda and this is nowhere better illustrated than in the variety of pathways encompassing a good range of vocational and general qualifications, designed to complement opportunities beyond the school. Time allocations are constantly challenged.

Leadership and management

The quality of leadership and management of creative learning is outstanding. Your senior staff work together with an impressive unity of purpose and consistency of approach, with both the capacity and the will to drive forward the use of creative learning to raise attainment throughout the school. Monitoring was listed as an area for improvement at the last Ofsted inspection in 2007. This has been the focus of your development programme and is now good. The school is adept in attracting resources, and especially the services

of professionals in the creative arts. With your active encouragement, teachers tap into this expertise in their own areas of the curriculum, using it to create interest, and contribute to a school culture that accepts any learning at all interesting and exciting, often involving areas that would be impossible without professional help.

There are times when tensions rise as a result of constraints in relation to space, sophisticated technology and time allocation. School buildings on the verge of demolition to give way to a brand new school do not help. Nevertheless, the school manages to make the best possible use of what is available. Access to training and development by staff is often excellent, but budgetary constraints sometime mean that not as much is available as might be wished.

Equality and diversity

The school promotes equality and diversity very well. Students enjoy school greatly and this encourages above average attendance. All students are treated with trust and respect and it is notable that many of them are members of staff and student committees, such as the BSF committee and the Creativity learning action group.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

further developing ways in which to support curriculum development through the continuing professional development of your staff.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop creativity in the school.

As we explained in our 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

David Lewis
Additional Inspector