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Mrs S Pryor
Principal
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Dear Mrs Pryor

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: art, craft and design

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 20 and 21 March 2012 to look at work in art, craft and design.

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 without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of art, craft and design is good.

Achievement in art, craft and design

Achievement in art, craft and design is good.

- Students enjoy the subject, particularly the opportunities to create different types of work and the freedom to express personal opinions and feelings through their art work. They achieve well in all key stages. The proportion achieving A* to C grades at GCSE is consistently above average and pass rates on BTEC art and design courses are high, though fewer achieve higher grades than is seen nationally. The proportion achieving A and B grades in AS and A-level art has improved over the last three years, though remains more variable in photography.
- Standards of practical work are high, with the strongest work demonstrating good observational drawing, with confident and sensitive handling of a range of media. Students use drawing well, both to record first-hand studies and to develop imagery and explore ideas for

composition, in a systematic and structured way. The best work clearly demonstrates how students have applied experimentation with varied media and their research into other artists in their own work, although this is not always consistently the case.

- Students do not achieve the highest grades when too much reliance is placed on using secondary images and their drawing skills are not refined sufficiently to enable them to realise their intentions. Weaker sketchbooks are sometimes fragmentary, with limited evidence of sustained exploration or development of ideas, and too little annotation to explain students' thinking processes.
- The subject makes a strong contribution to students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Students enjoy engaging with complex and challenging ideas, for example in the Year 8 project on issues and beliefs. Year 10 students explore a variety of social, moral and political issues relating to women's position in contemporary society, and clearly articulate personal responses to challenging topics such as domestic violence and poverty.

Quality of teaching in art, craft and design

The quality of teaching in art, craft and design is good.

- Lesson plans routinely take account of students' prior attainment and different abilities and teachers vary tasks and approaches to help all students make good progress. Teachers' high expectations provide a good level of challenge for more able students, and they are adept in supporting students with weaker drawing skills to exploit other creative media, including photography. Relationships between teachers and students are very good, and the vast majority of students respond very positively.
- Good questioning by teachers helps students develop their capacity to think for themselves and work independently. Students frequently seek out a diverse range of artists and photographers relevant to their own work, rather than relying only on better-known examples, or those suggested by teachers. In a sixth form lesson, students' very good peer assessment enabled them to share technical knowledge and identify points for improvement in each others' work.
- Teachers monitor students' progress very effectively in lessons and through assessment. GCSE and A-level students use well-designed assessment booklets to set their own targets and evaluate their progress towards them. Teachers check regularly that students have completed work and acted on areas for improvement. While teachers mark work regularly in Key Stage 3 and on BTEC courses, making useful comments to support improvement, the systematic recording of targets and progress is less well developed.

Quality of the curriculum in art, craft and design

The quality of the curriculum in art, craft and design is good.

- The well-planned curriculum enables students to explore varied media and techniques in drawing, painting, printmaking, textiles, 3-dimensional and digital media. Projects provide a good balance of working from observation, exploring formal elements and investigating relevant contemporary themes and issues. Students, particularly on BTEC and A-level photography courses, develop good technical skills in using digital media, through manipulating imagery and developing online portfolios.
- Students in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form make good use of gallery visits for research and inspiration for their own work. No specific art-based visits for Key Stage 3 students take place; however, extended art projects through focus days linked to the school's humanities specialism are popular with students. The school reviews the curriculum regularly, and new A-level courses in photography and fashion have proved very popular with students.
- While students receive information about a range of specialist pathways in art and design, to support their choices for Key Stage 4 and sixth form study, they are less well informed about career opportunities and the realities of working in the creative and cultural industries. Few opportunities exist for students to work directly with creative practitioners. BTEC design briefs set a work-related scenario, but have insufficient opportunities for students to work with clients.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in art, craft and design

The effectiveness of leadership and management in art, craft and design is outstanding.

- The subject leader's work has had a very positive impact on raising achievement in the subject and across the school. For example, the art and design department is leading whole-school developments in embedding personal learning and thinking skills in the curriculum, and in training teachers in strategies to capture and record feedback, strengthening assessment for learning across the school.
- A strong focus on inclusion has enabled all groups of students to achieve well. The school provides excellent support for several students with sensory impairment, enabling them to participate fully in the subject. Significant revisions to the curriculum have successfully met students' different interests and abilities and contributed to improving achievement.
- Rigorous and critical self-evaluation accurately identifies strengths and areas for further development. Internal lesson observations provide detailed feedback to teachers on how they can improve their practice further. Extensive display of students' work around the school acknowledges and celebrates their achievement.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- increasing the proportion of higher grades attained in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form by ensuring that all students:
 - develop high-quality drawing skills, including recording from primary sources, and annotate and evaluate their work in progress
 - apply what they have learned from media experimentation and artists’ research more explicitly and consistently to their own practice
 - benefit from the stronger assessment systems currently used at GCSE and A level
 - develop greater depth of understanding of working in the creative and cultural industries through more opportunities to interact with practitioners and clients.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop art, craft and design in the school.

As explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection.

Yours sincerely

Janet Mercer
Her Majesty’s Inspector