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Mr D Dickinson
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Dickinson

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 04-05 November 2008 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 observation of 16 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of how creative learning is developed was judged to be good. Aspects of creative learning are now embedded into the school's teaching and learning practice.

Achievement and standards

Students' improved enjoyment and responsibility for their own learning have impacted on their achievement. They have been more engaged in lessons, and more responsive to the additional interventions aimed at ensuring that they fulfil their potential in national tests and examinations. Achievement in 2008 was good in Years 7 to 9 and in Years 10 and 11. Across Years 7 to 9 students whose results had been below average in Year 6 reached overall standards which were very close to the national average. They exceeded their

challenging targets, doing particularly well in English and science. This sustained a three-year trend of improvement. Standards in Year 11 were still slightly below average, but significantly improved from previous years. There has been a significant increase in students' sense of ownership of their learning and in their involvement in the way the school develops. Students are also gaining real benefits from the extensive opportunities to develop skills which are needed in the workplace.

Quality of teaching and learning

It is widely understood that making lessons as enjoyable as possible is the most effective way of improving students' achievement. Most though not yet all teachers are increasingly prepared to take risks and find innovative ways of making learning exciting. A significant number of outstanding lessons observed during this visit reflected highly creative planning. This showed particularly in an English lesson where students sampled methods used by advertisers and pop musicians to generate ideas for their creative writing. Care is taken to support a range of preferred learning styles and a strong emphasis on experiment and discussion encourages students to explore and consolidate their understanding. In a history lesson on the Weimar republic, for example, students worked in groups to summarise visually what they had studied, without using any words. Careful planning supports students' understanding of the workplace, developing their thinking and social skills. There are extensive opportunities for students to work independently and teachers make very good use of innovative technologies to sustain the pace of learning. Groups of teachers are exploring ways of assessing students' development of creative learning, but there is not an effective system yet in place.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is well developed to promote creative learning. Very effective links with Creative Partnerships have firmly established the importance of presenting opportunities for students to use their imagination to generate ideas and to develop skills which will be essential in the workplace. As a result, the school was well prepared to introduce the new curriculum for Years 7 to 9. The development of a range of Diplomas and Business Technology and Education Council courses is providing increased opportunities for independent study, as well as greater relevance as students work in a range of real life contexts. Year 10 students, for example, were preparing a demonstration for local residents to illustrate how home cooking can promote healthy eating. In addition, the school is seeking innovative ways to meet individual needs through its alternative curriculum, early entry for examinations, and individual support for students who are at risk of under-achievement. Students' appreciation of these approaches has been demonstrated by extremely high attendance at additional sessions offered outside term time. The range of extra-curricular activities, both in physical education and in the extended schools programme, has been extended and adapted to meet students' interests more closely. Extended links with local primary schools now provide good opportunities for students to develop their leadership skills in physical education and a range of other activities.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are promoting and embedding creative learning very effectively. Your vision of how the school can be further improved is shared by governors and managers at all levels. It is continually refined through rigorous review of current practice. Creativity is valued, experiment is expected and students' enjoyment is seen as crucially important. Preparations for building refurbishment and the campaign to avoid closure of the school provided a catalyst for a significant shift in the role of the student voice. The school council, with sub-committees that report to governors on areas such as teaching and learning and cultural diversity, now provides important feedback to senior managers on the effectiveness of their work.

Equality and diversity

The school promotes equality and diversity very well. Students have frequent opportunities to work on problem-solving tasks where there are no pre-determined right answers. As a result there is no risk of failure and pupils are less intimidated by the activities. The most confident teachers accept that students think and work in different ways, and try to provide scope for them to do this in every lesson. In two mathematics classes the most able students and those with special educational needs showed exactly the same lively enthusiasm and curiosity as they explored aspects of probability. Making work relevant and accessible to all students is a planning priority. In a low attaining physical education class, Year 7 students explored African Dance before moving on to street dancing and break dancing. Their enthusiasm as they practised warrior-like expressions in their warm up clearly showed that the teacher had pitched that activity at exactly the right level, and these students were hooked by this project.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- further developing the evaluation of creative initiatives to identify how they are raising standards and improving personal development
- improving the consistency of creative approaches to learning across all of the lessons in all subject areas.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop creative learning 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

Ross Parker
Additional Inspector