

Link governor meeting with Carine Soudanne and Anna Knott

Wednesday, 4 May 2022

I was invited to spend some time with Head of Languages Carine Soudanne and Assistant Head Anna Knott, to meet and find out more about the languages department at KGGS.

It's a busy time in the Languages department, with GCSE and A Level oral exams in full swing. The impression I was left with was that there's never a quiet time in the department! What shone through was the staff's commitment and constant drive to make things better for the girls (and boys from King's), supporting them in the best way possible.

The staff are dynamic, trying to stay one step ahead, regardless what's thrown at them, especially when it comes to syllabus changes and expectations after two years without exams.

This year, for the first time, the decision was made to change the timing of the speaking language mocks. Previously, these would take place in November, with a long gap before the summer exams. This year, they were done in January, with a bit more of the syllabus covered, giving the students more opportunity to use what they had learned. Also, the traditional order of the other mock exams was switched. Instead of listening, reading and writing papers, the girls were given reading and then listening, to see if the reading could warm them up better for the listening, which can be very tricky. Early results show the students fared better and nudged many of them into the next grade band.

There are currently healthy numbers studying at GCSE level but numbers are lower for next year. Carine believes that the current Year 9s have been the year group most impacted by Covid-related disruptions so trying to build their confidence and show them they can be successful in language subjects is an on-going challenge.

Another challenge is promoting the value of languages across the school, when experiences such as exchange trips have been impossible and now very difficult to set up. The amount of safeguarding paperwork for trips like these is huge and almost prohibitive. We discussed maybe trying a pilot exchange trip with a smaller group, just to see what was possible. The value of these trips is great, even if it can seem hard to get there!

There are some fun-sounding events coming up, including House Continental Breakfast for Year 8 and Year 9. The girls invite teachers and the odd governor to join them for breakfast, with different houses allocated different countries. I'm very much looking forward to taking part on 10 June!

The department benefits from language assistants; a French assistant every year and Spanish and German assistants every other year. Brexit and Covid have made things more difficult when it comes to funding and organising for the assistants to join the school but their contribution is greatly valued.

In terms of staffing, there is a high proportion of part-time teachers in the languages department. The staff really are supportive when it comes to flexible working requests but this brings its own challenges. Co-ordinating meetings, people's days off and continuity can mean some full-time staff are working at or beyond capacity. It might be good to check in with the team, to make sure there isn't a risk of burnout. I'm sure they'll all say they're fine as their commitment is clear but it's something to consider and be proactive about.

All in all, I thoroughly enjoyed my time (and lunch) with Carine and Anna and was highly impressed by the work that's happening in the languages department, as well as the plans for the future. Merci, danke schön and gracias!