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Mr N Scruton
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Dear Mr Scruton

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 9 and 10 November 2010 to look at work in English.

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 eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is outstanding.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is outstanding.

- Attainment in English has been consistently above average at the end of Key Stage 4 over the past three years. GCSE results in English Language have improved substantially over recent years and English Literature results have been even more impressive. The department enters virtually all students for English Literature. Nearly 90% obtained A* to C grades in 2009 with nearly one third achieving the A*/A grades. The department is aware that not enough students obtain the highest grades in English Language, although this is likely to be related in part to the college's early entry policy for English.
- Standards on entry to the school are average. The above-average results at the end of Key Stage 4 indicate that progress overall is excellent. The college has been successful in closing the gap between girls' and boys'

attainment in English; some other groups of students, including those eligible for free school meals and students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, also do very well.

- Progress was good in the lessons observed. Students are very keen to do well and show extremely positive attitudes towards learning. Many of the students speak confidently and display high standards in their oral work.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Students enjoy English. They speak very positively about their teachers, praising their dedication and commitment. All students agree that their English teachers are very helpful and understanding and that they go out of their way to help and support students.
- The teaching observed was consistently good overall. Relationships are very strong and teachers use a range of active strategies that keep students involved. Subject knowledge is secure and this enables teachers to provide a high level of challenge in lessons. A number of lessons showed very well-planned and effective group and pair discussions.
- During the inspection, there was a tendency for teachers to over-plan lessons. This led to them attempting to include too many activities within a limited period of time, rather than concentrating on the key activities that would have an impact on students' learning in the lesson. The quality of questioning also varied, although the most effective lessons showed good use of the department's 'no hands up' policy.
- Assessment is very strong. Students are consistently given information about the assessment criteria in lessons with regular opportunities for self- and peer-review. The quality of marking is very high. Most teachers give substantial and helpful feedback to students and provide them with clear curricular targets that help them to understand the next steps in their learning.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The curriculum in English is good.

- The curriculum is very well planned across both key stages. Careful thought has been given to the choice of appropriate GCSE courses in order to meet students' needs. The curriculum is reviewed on a regular basis. Assessment is built well into schemes of work.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum has a number of innovative features. It has been constructed specifically to meet the needs of students in the college and all units of work are distinctive. Some of the units have been deliberately planned to engage boys and this has proved successful. There are also several units that link effectively with other areas of the curriculum, such as the pantomime unit and the Dragon's Den scheme of work.

- The promotion of students' wider, independent reading is promoted well through weekly reading lessons and guidance to students to read challenging literary texts.
- There are gaps at present in the integration of information and communication technology, including moving image work, within the Key Stage 3 curriculum; although drama work is a popular element with students. The curriculum is focused right from Year 7 on the requirements of the GCSE examination. There is a need to balance assessment-focused work with a broader range of activities that emphasise creative responses to texts, and to give students more opportunities to write for real audiences and contexts, including some beyond the classroom.
- The department provides an excellent range of additional support sessions for students, especially at Key Stage 4. This makes a considerable contribution to the high standards reached at the end of Key Stage 4. Perhaps as a consequence, the range of enrichment activities is more limited, although provision includes several school drama productions, a reading club for less confident readers and an annual visit to the Globe Theatre in London.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are outstanding.

- The department leadership has been extremely successful in raising standards in English over recent years. In addition, it has helped to make English a popular lesson for students.
- The head of department provides highly committed and clear leadership. She is well-supported by a strong team of teachers, several of whom take responsibility for specific areas of the department's work. This is a dedicated and hard-working team with a very good capacity for further improvement. Teachers work closely together and share ideas and best practice. There is a very positive team ethos.
- The department has been well-supported by the senior leadership team, both through the close support of the deputy headteacher and the decision to provide enhanced staffing for English.
- The school's self-evaluation in English is thorough and accurate. Monitoring and evaluation are very well-developed. The department gets feedback from both students and teachers through questionnaires. Lesson observations are regular, standardised and involve all members of the department. This process is further enhanced by detailed analysis of data and the effective use of standardisation, moderation and work sampling.
- The department is ambitious to raise standards further and has targeted the right priorities for improvement, including the performance of its more academic students. Subject plans are admirably detailed but lack some specificity in identifying the key changes needed and in focusing on possible further developments in teaching.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving lesson planning so that teachers concentrate on the key activities that will aid students' progress in the lesson
- reviewing the balance in the Key Stage 3 curriculum between preparation for the GCSE examinations and the development of a broader range of skills in English.

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

As I 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. Except in the case of academies, a copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Philip Jarrett
Her Majesty's Inspector