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Mrs R Barnfield
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Barnfield

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 27 and 28 September 2010 to look at work in English. My colleague, who accompanied me on the first day, and I greatly appreciated the cheerful efficiency with which our visit was managed.

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 10 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is good.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- In 2008 and 2009, attainment in English was significantly above the national average. A quarter of those who took GCSE English achieved A* or A grades, and nearly four-fifths achieved a grade C or above. Two fifths of those taking English Literature gained A* or A grades, and the great majority achieved a grade C or higher. Provisional results for 2010 indicate further improvement, with 92% gaining grade C or above in English, of which 47% were graded A or A*.
- Students' prior attainment on entry is relatively strong, with a greater than average proportion of high attainers. While attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 remained above the national average in 2007 and 2008, students made significantly less progress in English than predicted on the basis of

their Key Stage 2 results. In 2009, progress of all groups of students improved and was broadly in line with national averages.

- In 2009, 34 students took A-level English Literature, achieving an average points score per entry above the national standard. Observation of students' current work indicates that the department's focus on raising standards further and accelerating progress is having a positive impact. Sixth formers spoke enthusiastically about opportunities for independent thinking and lively debate.
- Students are keen to do well and work hard to achieve their personal targets, routinely measuring their current levels against National Curriculum and examination boards' grade descriptors. They feel well prepared for GCSE, AS and A level.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Much of the teaching observed was good or better. Amongst its conspicuous strengths were enthusiastic subject knowledge, well-structured planning, a confident and productive use of assessment, good questioning skills and a positive rapport with students. Examples of excellent practice were seen in GCSE and A-level classes, with students being encouraged to explore interpretations, to debate, negotiate and explain – always with the examination requirements in mind.
- In less effective lessons, good planning was not consistently implemented when tasks and expectations were not well matched to students' varying abilities and learning styles. Able students, for example, were not always appropriately challenged. The focus on skills assessment, especially in Key Stage 3, tended to limit opportunities for independent learning.
- Most marking of written work was thorough and combined encouragement with well-judged guidance on how to improve.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum in English is good.

- Schemes of work are detailed, strongly linked to National Curriculum requirements and examination boards' specifications. Students in Key Stage 3, including boys, find many of the units of study engaging; the science fiction and 'Legends' units have proved particularly successful and prompted some interesting creative writing. The focus on skills assessment has meant that complete novels and plays are seldom studied in Years 7 to 9. The head of department recognises the need to establish a secure balance between the demands of challenging targets, opportunities for creativity and extended engagement with literature. The curriculum allows for both but practice is uneven at present.
- Students in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form are emphatic that their enjoyment of English has been enhanced by opportunities to develop their

personal responses to texts they find interesting. This was very evident in a number of the lessons observed.

- The marked increase in the number of students opting for an English course in the sixth form is evidence of the interest and confidence engendered in Key Stage 4. The decision to offer English Language A level as well as English Literature has proved popular.
- The curriculum is complemented by theatre visits and workshops and by engaging projects run through the Learning Resource Centre. Plans are in place to increase the range of activities offered, such as debating.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are good.

- The vision for English is clear and ambitious. Acting on advice from consultants following the last inspection in 2009, the development and assessment of literacy and communication skills have been prioritised to raise attainment and improve progress. The upward trend in GCSE attainment over the past three years shows that this is working.
- The head of department is strongly supported by one of the deputy heads, with challenging but manageable targets being set for staff and students. Teaching is monitored rigorously. Members of the department are mutually supportive, collaborating on lesson planning, observing each other and sharing best practice. Well-founded self-evaluation and the conspicuous success of recent initiatives in driving up standards indicate an excellent capacity for further improvement.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that students' differing abilities and styles of learning are always supported actively and that able students are challenged consistently to be ambitious, independent and critical in their exploration of ideas and texts
- establishing a balance in Key Stage 3 between the development of key skills and the nurturing of students' creativity and appreciation of literature.

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

Patricia Metham
Her Majesty's Inspector