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Miss F Hutchings
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Dear Miss Hutchings

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 8 and 9 December 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 parts of eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is outstanding.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- Attainment in English has been above average over the last three years as measured by the proportion of students attaining at least a C grade at GCSE. Students do exceptionally well in English literature, where examination entries are restricted to top sets, and in media studies. Attainment is high in the sixth form for English language, English literature and media studies, although the proportion of students achieving the highest possible grades is below average.
- Students make good progress. They join the school at the start of Year 7 having achieved a level of attainment broadly in line with the national average. Contextual value-added measures indicate that progress has

been satisfactory in English language over the last three years from Key Stages 2 to 4. However, the department's policy is to enter all students early for English language in order to give them opportunities to study English literature or media studies; as a result, not as many as expected achieved the highest possible grades. All student groups made similar rates of progress including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. In the sixth form, progress has also been good. From above average starting points, students have achieved outcomes at A level which are well above the national average.

- Standards in lessons seen were above average and progress was good. The school's data suggest that current Year 11 students are on course to reach standards above the national average by the end of Key Stage 4, having achieved broadly average standards on entry to the school in Year 7.
- The overwhelming majority of students enjoy their learning in English because they appreciate the opportunity to think and write creatively. They welcome the additional support that they receive. Not all higher attaining students are challenged to do as well as they possibly can.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Almost all of the lessons seen during the inspection were either good or outstanding. Relationships between teachers and students are very good and students recognise how staff give freely of their time to support their written work at lunchtime or after school.
- Most lessons are characterised by activities that stimulate students to move round the classroom sharing information with each other in pairs or groups. Lessons are planned to move at a fast pace with an emphasis on students' speaking and listening. Nearly all students respond positively to the chance to initiate their own ideas and questions in whole-class discussions.
- Occasionally, lessons are too teacher-led and questioning is focused on a narrow range of students who volunteer answers. Time is lost in lessons when technology is not used efficiently enough. Extension work is not always planned for higher attaining students
- Most students know their current level or grade in English and the grade they are aiming for. Although most have challenging targets, some higher-attaining students do not aspire to achieve them. Marking of course work is accurate and gives students clear guidance how to improve. Exercise books are not always routinely marked in line with departmental policy, although some teachers give helpful written feedback. The 'responsibility for learning' sheets used by students are not checked regularly by teachers.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum in English is outstanding.

- The school has developed an impressive range of courses and schemes of work targeted at individual needs and interests, including a new English language course at A level and the introduction of media and film studies. Uptake has increased significantly for A level courses. An accredited course is provided for any learners of English as an additional language not able to access GCSE English.
- The needs of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities are met well through tailored programmes. Students in Year 7 at risk of falling behind are served well by a phonics programme. Older pupils support younger readers through guided reading sessions during tutorial time.
- The curriculum is flexible so that students can finish Key Stage 3 and GCSE courses a year early. Students start their new year in June which gives them additional time. Students on the Year 7 phonics programme can start Key Stage 3 later.
- The new library plays a significant part in supporting pupils' literacy. It is a hub for lessons and after-school activities and a focus for a wide range of extra-curricular activities including reading, film and drama clubs, and visits by authors. The English department has established a strong link with the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are outstanding.

- The head of department has recently been seconded to the senior management team to develop assessment across the school based on the high quality of assessment in English. Leaders in the English department have worked particularly closely in coaching partnerships with the mathematics and science departments.
- Self-evaluation, supported by outstanding data analysis of all groups and individuals, ensures that leaders and managers have an excellent knowledge of strengths and weaknesses in English. Regular and accurate monitoring of teaching, combined with support, peer mentoring and joint observations have ensured that teaching is good.
- As the leading subject in the humanities specialism, the English department has taken the lead in developing cross-curricular links with other subjects, by developing joint programmes on studying poetry
- Staff development is a key focus for driving improvement and the English department is responsible for whole-school training, for example on developing thinking skills.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raise the proportion of students achieving the highest possible grades in English by providing:

- challenging activities in lessons that are planned consistently to ensure that higher-attaining students do as well as they can
- consistent feedback to students so that they have a clear idea of how to achieve the highest possible grades and are motivated to achieve them.

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

Mark Sims
Her Majesty's Inspector