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26 January 2011

Mr D Goulty
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Dear Mr Goulty

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: English and mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during the visit I made with Stephen Abbott HMI on 29 and 30 November 2010 to look at work in English and mathematics.

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.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; observation of eight English and 11 mathematics lessons; and further short visits to lessons.

The overall effectiveness of both English and mathematics is satisfactory.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is satisfactory.

- Attainment is below average but improving. The proportion of students who gained a grade C or higher in GCSE English rose significantly in 2010 and was closer to the national average. However, the students' average points score in English, based on unvalidated data, remained well below the national level. This is because too few reached the highest grades and because some students achieved much less than was expected. The groups which made least progress were boys and girls with below average prior attainment, those eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs.

- A legacy of low achievement is being addressed. The proportion of students achieving grade C+ in English at GCSE has improved from 40% to 62% over the past three years. Students currently in the school are generally positive about English. Their work shows satisfactory progress. More of the abler students are now on track to reach high grades. Fewer students in Year 11 are below their targets than at the same time last year. Students are responding well to teaching which is engaging and effective, but in some observed lessons were more passive and did not work independently enough.
- Standards in reading, writing, and speaking and listening have not yet caught up with the average. Across the ability range, written work is sometimes underdeveloped and poorly presented. Students know the level or grade they are aiming for, but they are not always clear about what they need to do in their current work to move towards it.
- In the sixth form, students have generally made satisfactory progress. However, school data suggest that progress in A-level English courses in 2010 was very good. Standards are in general slightly below average. Those taking A-levels enjoy the experience and appreciate the support for their progress. The department is equally effective in helping students to improve their GCSE grades in the sixth form.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is satisfactory.

- In the lessons observed, teachers used their good subject knowledge to give lessons a clear purpose and to explore relevant topics and appealing texts. They usually explained ideas well and used modern technology and a variety of stimulating tasks to help students engage with suitably challenging work. Students say that learning is often active and fun. Teachers and other adults in the classroom encourage and motivate students and are quick to respond to those who need extra help.
- However, less effective lessons tend to miss opportunities to deepen students' understanding by probing their responses. Sometimes students work less hard than the teachers, because insufficient time is allowed for sustained independent work. High expectations for literacy are not promoted persistently.
- The impact of assessment is variable. Teachers explain learning objectives and usually refer to them during lessons; they sometimes involve students in assessing their own progress. Marking broadly follows school policy by periodically giving students written feedback on what they have achieved and indicating targets. Despite this, students do not always have a clear understanding of what counts as good reading, writing or speaking and listening. This is because good practice in the use of questioning, success criteria and individual targets has not been embedded consistently.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum in English is satisfactory.

- Students have a broad choice of courses, enhanced by the school's performing arts specialism. The large majority take GCSE in English Literature or Media Studies in addition to English. Advanced level courses in English Literature and English Language are relatively popular.
- Priority has been given to securing more C grades, for example by entering students for examinations early and enabling re-sits. Having had some success in this, the school is now adapting the curriculum to raise attainment for all. For example, the current Year 9 has begun a two-year GCSE English course, rather than starting the course in Year 10.
- The compressed Key Stage 3 curriculum emphasises the use of literacy and creative skills in different areas of learning. In Year 8 students are following an innovative programme which combines English with information and communication technology. Progress in all areas of English is being monitored and individual tuition is provided for those making slow progress. Although it is too early to see any significant impact in all aspects of English, there are already signs that Years 7 and 8 are reading more as a result of improved resources and structured incentives.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are satisfactory.

- The team of specialists includes a good range of experience which has been strengthened by recent appointments. The direction for English has to a great extent been shaped by the whole-school priority to increase the A*-C pass rate at GCSE, to which the team has contributed well. This has improved the attainment of some students from a very low base.
- The head of English understands the subject's strengths and weaknesses. She has used a commendably wide range of monitoring evidence to evaluate the work of the department. Teachers are held to account and they reflect on how their teaching affects students' progress. Appropriate areas to improve have been highlighted, and a recently introduced programme of subject training enables the team to share good practice.
- However, the analysis of the attainment and progress of different groups of students is not sufficiently systematic. The improvement plan for this school year does not yet provide detail about what everyone in the team is expected to do. The handbook and schemes of work do not give a clear enough picture of all the key features which are expected of English teaching.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that all groups of students make satisfactory or better progress, by improving the consistency of teaching and evaluating the impact of strategies on different groups
- strengthening guidance to teachers about good approaches to teaching English, particularly in regard to:

- setting high expectations for sustained and well-presented independent work
- the use of questioning, success criteria and individual targets.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Attainment in mathematics has improved over the last three years, from a very low base. The latest GCSE and A-level results are still below average, but standards are improving because students are making more progress from their below-average starting points.
- Students' progress in lessons is currently satisfactory. Students learn appropriate mathematical methods and develop their competence by working through plenty of exercises, albeit of a mainly routine nature. Learning is further reinforced, particularly for students near the C/D grade borderline, by a strong revision and intervention programme.
- Students' conceptual understanding is not as well developed as their procedural skills. This is partly a legacy of staffing problems that used to affect the mathematics department. Staffing is now stable, but the predominant teaching style does not encourage students to think for themselves enough, or to make sense of their answers. Students are therefore compliant but passive in many lessons.
- Some groups of students underachieved in the 2010 GCSE, including students with below average prior attainment, those entitled to free school meals and students with special educational needs. However, analysis of data supplied by the school suggests that these groups are performing better in the current Year 11. In recent years, more than one student in ten has been a persistent absentee. These students make slower progress in mathematics because they have too many gaps in their learning.

Quality of teaching of mathematics

The quality of teaching of mathematics is satisfactory.

- Lessons are planned thoroughly and classroom management is generally good. Most lessons allow sufficient time for students to work through exercises individually, but teaching is insufficiently focused on developing understanding. Although lessons are structured to give some variety, the main focus is on developing procedural competence.
- Teachers are conscientious and hard working, and some are still developing their subject expertise. As a result, some lesson activities do not address the learning objectives as well as they might. In one lesson, students practised plotting scatter diagrams, when the objective was to learn to interpret them. In two others, the teacher modelled ways of thinking about the work that reinforced a common misconception.
- The mathematics department has a well-established system of common assessments to track students' progress. Students are encouraged to assess their own progress against the learning objectives for each half

term. Test papers are analysed to identify common weaknesses for each class and students' individual revision needs.

- There is some inconsistency in other types of assessment, including marking and checks on progress in lessons. For example, the head of department's marking is exemplary; another teacher used assessment well during the lesson, but had not marked graphical work from earlier lessons. Some teachers check students' self-marking, to diagnose likely errors and misconceptions, but this is not universal.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is satisfactory.

- The schemes of work are sufficiently robust to ensure that work is covered in an appropriate order. Units of work are big enough to give teachers time to follow up topics that have not been successfully learnt. They include references to textbooks and materials for the interactive whiteboard, but offer little guidance on which teaching approaches to use. Consequently, students are not guaranteed continuity from year to year in how a topic is taught. For example, when teaching 'area' some teachers favour an approach that emphasises the concept of measuring space, but others concentrate solely on calculations based on area formulae.
- Teachers make some effort to include 'real life' relevance and mathematical investigations, but the schemes of work do not support a systematic development of students' skills in using and applying mathematics, or in interpreting mathematical information. For example, in one lesson, students correctly found the average of data on hand-spans, but did not recognise that their own hand-spans were much bigger.
- All students follow a GCSE mathematics course and almost all gain at least a grade G pass. The school has recently switched to a policy of starting the GCSE modular course in Year 9, for completion in Year 10, mirroring the practice in English. In Year 11, students will be offered a choice of re-sitting the GCSE to get a better grade, taking GCSE statistics, or taking a pre-A level course. The department is aware that any such change carries risks, for example that students who might be capable of A and A* grades in Year 11 will be satisfied with B or C grades in Year 10.
- Students who are identified for intervention in mathematics are supported in various ways. Some attend withdrawal groups to boost their performance. Revision classes are offered in school holidays and at weekends as the examinations approach. These interventions have played a key role in driving up the proportion of students gaining at least five GCSEs, including English and mathematics, at grade C or better. Some who have already passed GCSE English have extra mathematics lessons in place of English.

Effectiveness of leadership and management of mathematics

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of mathematics is satisfactory.

- The school has a very good system for ensuring that subject leaders are involved in regular monitoring and evaluation and are held accountable by line managers. This approach is helping to drive improvement. However, line managers' judgements about mathematics teaching are sometimes too generous because they do not put enough emphasis on issues such as mathematical correctness or the development of understanding.
- The head of department provides a good role model. She has led the department during a period of sustained improvement, overcoming considerable staffing difficulties. Each of her monitoring activities is followed up with an evaluation and action plan. Students' views are taken into account well through interviews and questionnaires.
- The capacity for improvement is satisfactory. Intervention, better examination preparation and stability in staffing have been the key features in the school's improvement in mathematics. Based on its assessment data, the school expects the A* to C pass rate to rise further. However, the tendency to focus on borderline students means that not all groups benefit equally. Leaders are not monitoring the performance of each group closely enough to be sure of closing the attainment gaps.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising achievement by using intervention programmes more widely, to close the attainment gaps between certain groups of students
- increasing teachers' subject expertise by developing their skills in teaching for understanding, selecting appropriate examples and conceptual models, and setting questions that provide a richer context for diagnostic marking
- involving all teachers in developing guidance to ensure that the schemes of work promote a coherent approach to topics from Year 7 to Year 11, and the progressive development of using and applying mathematics.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop English and mathematics 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

Susan Bowles
Her Majesty's Inspector