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Mr J Dowd  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Dowd

### **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 11 and 12 January 2011 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 good.

### **Achievement in English**

Achievement in English is good.

- Attainment on entry to the school is below average and many students arrive with significant weaknesses in basic literacy, particularly writing. Standards have improved by the end of Key Stage 4 over recent years but remain below average in both English and English Literature. However, provisional results from the early-entry GCSE examinations in English suggest that standards are likely to be substantially higher in 2011.
- Students' progress in English has been consistently very high across Key Stages 3 and 4 over the past three years. Indeed, contextual value-added data have placed the school in the top 5% nationally over the past two years. The proportion of students making expected rates of progress from Year 7 to Year 11 has also improved over this period and is better than average. Most groups of students perform equally well; this includes boys, girls, students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, and

students from minority ethnic groups. Some evidence suggests that the most able students achieve less highly although their results are likely to be affected by early entry for GCSE. The school has identified the need to work closely with some underachieving White British students who are eligible for free school meals.

- Standards in A-level English Literature are below average, reflecting satisfactory progress for students. Results for the first group of students to take English Language in 2010 were closer to the national average demonstrating better progress.
- Progress in the lessons observed was good. Students were mostly keen to learn, especially at Key Stage 4, and worked well together when given opportunities to collaborate. Some younger students, notably boys, were sometimes more difficult to engage in learning. Sixth-form students spoke confidently and well but many younger students struggled to express their ideas clearly in discussions.

### **Quality of teaching in English**

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Most students enjoy English. They speak very warmly about their teachers, praising their commitment and hard work. Students stress that teachers are very supportive and provide exceptional individual help for them.
- The teaching observed was good overall. Relationships were very strong. Lessons were planned in detail and there was clear consistency across the department. A particular strength was evident in the very close collaboration and planning between teachers and classroom assistants, with classroom assistants often equally involved in teaching the lesson. Lessons were marked by the good use of a range of interactive tasks, with several teachers prepared to experiment and 'try something different.' The best teaching involved well-targeted and exploratory questioning.
- In several lessons, the pace of learning was at times too quick, leaving students with too little time to complete the task or consolidate their learning. Planning sometimes seemed more focused on devising interesting teaching activities than identifying their likely impact on learning.
- Marking is good overall, with some examples of excellent work. The best marking is detailed and provides clear feedback to students about next steps. Some marking is not as helpful in providing feedback to students or targeting areas for improvement.

### **Quality of the curriculum in English**

The curriculum in English is good, with some outstanding features.

- The school is able to offer a wide range of courses in English and related areas to students. Nearly all students follow the GCSE English Literature course, and media courses are also very popular at GCSE and A level.

- School leaders are determined to raise standards in literacy and have considered the implications for the broader curriculum. For example, the school provides an integrated humanities course in Year 7. This includes a clear focus on literacy and the programme is staffed partly by English teachers. In addition, the school has introduced an individualised reading programme in English for its students in Year 7. This involves very close collaboration with library staff and has already had a positive impact on attitudes to reading and students' book borrowing. Another new initiative this year has been the introduction of one-to-one support in English.
- The English curriculum is planned well across all key stages. Units of work are supported by a good range of resources and teaching ideas. Early entry for English at GCSE has had a positive impact on students' motivation.
- The Key Stage 3 course is currently being revised. It has some innovative features, including an emphasis on language study. However, it does not yet have the clear sense of identity and planned progression evident at Key Stage 4. At present, there is a considerable emphasis on the skills needed for GCSE, and the approach to literary texts, for example, is predominantly an analytical one. Opportunities are missed to develop the use of information and communication technology (ICT), including moving-image work, in English and the work scrutiny suggests that some students are not given enough extended writing tasks.
- The curriculum is considerably enhanced by a wide range of enrichment activities. Some of these have been funded by the school's LINCCS programme which has provided very good opportunities for students, including pupils from several local primary schools, to work with writers, drama specialists and theatre groups. Other activities open to students include the media club, an after-school journalism course and drama-based work at the Roundhouse. Overall, this is a strong and imaginative programme.

### **Effectiveness of leadership and management in English**

Leadership and management in English are good, with some outstanding features.

- The head of department leads a very large and complex department well. She has helped to create a cohesive team and overseen rising standards across Key Stages 3 and 4. Delegation within the department is good and enables key teachers to provide leadership in important areas of work. Teachers work closely together and are keen to share ideas. The English team is potentially a very strong one. Teachers are hard-working, keen to learn from others and reflective. The capacity for further improvement is very good despite the substantial challenge in raising attainment.
- The department is supported very well by the school's senior leaders who have a clear understanding of the importance of standards in English and have introduced several whole-school initiatives to improve literacy. Links between the department and the senior leadership team are close and productive.

- Self-evaluation in English is secure and realistic. Students' progress is monitored closely and analysis of performance is rigorous. The subject action plan is clear about the need to raise standards further and identifies a good range of strategies. However, although it includes the target of ensuring that all teaching is at least good, it is not clear how this is to be achieved or what areas of weakness need to be tackled.

**Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:**

- identifying more clearly those actions that are likely to have the most impact on further raising the quality of teaching in English
- reviewing the Key Stage 3 curriculum to improve its coherence and progression, including opportunities for greater use of ICT and moving-image work in English, as well as a better balance of creative and analytical approaches to texts.

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**