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Ms M Mulchrone
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Mulchrone

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 1 and 2 March 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 six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is good.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- Attainment is broadly average at the end of Key Stage 4. However, the trend is upwards and results from the GCSE English Language examinations taken in November suggest that attainment is even higher this year. English Literature results have also improved substantially from 49% to 71% over the past three years. The proportion of students who have achieved A or A* grades has increased in both courses although it remains slightly below average. The school's assessments suggest that attainment has also risen at the end of Key Stage 3.
- Standards in reading are better than standards in writing.
- The contextual value-added data suggest that progress in recent years has been satisfactory. However, the current GCSE results show that the present Year 11 group of students has made good progress. The

proportion of students making expected rates of progress from Key Stage 2 to 4 is also better than average. Overall, students' current progress is good.

- No significant differences exist between the rates of progress of the various groups in the school. Boys achieve as well as girls in English and students from the different minority ethnic groups perform equally well. The school identified some underperformance in the past from a small group of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities; this has been addressed and these students are currently doing as well as others in the school.
- Students are mostly keen to learn and their behaviour is good. They work well together and particularly enjoy lessons which are lively and interactive.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Most students enjoy English. They form good relationships with teachers and praise their teachers' enthusiasm and the extra help they provide.
- In the lessons observed, relationships were strong. Teachers were consistent in setting clear and appropriate learning objectives that helped students understand what they were doing. Teachers used a range of challenging literary texts. In the most effective lessons, students were very well engaged through good resources, including images and film clips, and active approaches such as drama. Models of writing were always available to help students and the most effective lessons included good support for students of varied abilities through differentiated materials.
- Where students' learning was less secure, this sometimes reflected lessons that were too teacher-dominated with limited opportunities for students, including the most able, to work independently or develop their own insights into the texts they were reading. In the most effective lessons, teachers were very successful in involving all students in discussion; at other times, discussion tended to be dominated by a few more confident students and this prevented teachers from monitoring the understanding and learning of other students.
- Assessment is good. New procedures are working well. These procedures include individual progress sheets for all students that give them a target level and identify the steps needed to make progress. Students are actively involved in charting their own progress and consider this very helpful. Marking is mostly detailed and thorough, giving students helpful feedback on areas for improvement.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum in English is good.

- The newly appointed head of department has worked hard, supported by colleagues, to rewrite schemes of work that provide helpful guidance for teaching. Assessment is well integrated into schemes of work.
- The curriculum has some very distinctive features. There is good emphasis on high-quality literary texts and texts that match students' experiences and cultures. Students also enjoy some original units that focus on media texts, including the television series, *The Simpsons*.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum focuses closely on developing those skills that students will need when they take GCSE. The approach to developing reading is currently more systematic than the teaching of writing. Evidence from the work scrutiny suggested that some students complete too little extended writing and that there should be a better balance of creative and analytical responses to texts. The department's commitment to literary texts is strong but opportunities exist to extend work further on non-literary texts and to develop greater use of information and communication technology, including the production of moving-image texts.
- Some aspects of enrichment are outstanding. The school has a good tradition of public speaking, and regular literacy events, such as National Poetry day, take place as well as theatre visits and competitions. There is a very well-managed programme of support for reading in Key Stage 3. This involves targeted support for a large number of students and assessments suggest that it is working well. There is also a reading group for more able readers.
- Whole-school measures to improve literacy are effective and close links have been established between the English department and the Special Needs team.
- Reading for pleasure is promoted well through the provision for whole-class study of a wide range of texts; the department is also considering other ways to promote enjoyment of reading.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

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

- The newly appointed head of department has had a substantial impact in a brief period. Standards have risen, teaching has improved, and several new initiatives have already had a positive impact. She is a very effective classroom practitioner and, along with other senior colleagues, is in a good position to model good classroom practices.
- There is a strong sense of subject identity in the school and the subject leader provides very clear direction, focused on further raising standards. The emphasis on enhancing teaching has been very successful. This has been achieved through a range of measures including regular lesson observations, close attention to monitoring marking, support for new teachers, and coaching sessions. Weekly departmental meetings have enabled teachers to share good practice and learn from each other. This

has all helped to create a strong departmental ethos with very good collaboration. As a result, the capacity for further improvement is very good.

- The department has been well supported by the senior leadership team. A detailed and effective departmental review last November provided good feedback on areas of strength and weakness, leading to well-directed subject action plans. The response from the department has been positive.
- Students' progress is monitored carefully and these data have been used well to target early intervention in reading.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- reviewing the Key Stage 3 scheme of work to ensure a better balance of reading and writing, literary and non-literary texts, and creative and analytical responses to texts
- extending opportunities in lessons for students, including the most able, to work independently and to develop their own, personal responses 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