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Mrs E Hitch
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Hitch

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 7 and 8 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 eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is outstanding.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is outstanding.

- Attainment in English has been consistently well above average at the end of Key Stage 4, with 90% of students obtaining A* to C grades in 2010. Almost all students are also entered for GCSE English Literature. The proportion of students attaining the highest grades in English and English Literature is significantly above the national average. Attainment at Key Stage 5 is similarly strong for all groups of students. No significant gaps exist in the attainment of different groups.
- Standards on entry to the school are above average. Students' progress is good overall and some make exceptional progress. As a result of one-to-one tuition, students who enter school with low literacy levels are

supported very well and make good progress. Boys' progress in 2010 was stronger than girls' progress.

- Progress in the lessons observed was good overall and outstanding when students were able to develop as independent learners. Students have positive attitudes to English and apply themselves well to the work set.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Students enjoy English and respond well to their teachers' high expectations. Very positive relationships exist. Teachers have excellent subject knowledge and use this with striking impact during lessons. When teaching was particularly strong, it enabled students to become actively involved in their own learning.
- Teaching observed in Key Stage 5 was strong and gave students good opportunities to develop as independent learners. Recent staff training has been focused on strategies to support independent learning even further.
- High-quality questioning is used to probe students' understanding and extend their thinking. This also enables teachers to assess effectively how well students are learning in lessons. Marking is consistently accurate and of a high quality, with many examples of precise feedback on how to improve.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The curriculum in English is outstanding.

- The high-quality curriculum meets the needs of all students and has an excellent balance of reading, writing and speaking and listening opportunities. Year 7 English begins with an innovative focus on engaging students in creative and imaginative writing. This is extended in Year 8 with students writing a story for a child they met while visiting the local primary schools. Students have explicit opportunities to develop their speaking and listening skills, for example in public speaking units of work. The topics chosen in this unit are both interesting and challenging, ranging from footballers' pay to 'What is art?' and natural selection.
- Students study a wide range of poetry, prose fiction, drama, media and non-fiction texts across the key stages. These text choices include substantial examples from the English literary heritage as well as modern, thought-provoking texts. The school's librarian supports students' access to high quality literature including novels in translation. The library is a lively, well-used resource that supports learning across the school. Students are given some opportunities to engage with new technologies in lessons.

- Sixth-form consortium arrangements mean that students can study both English Language and English Literature to A-level standard. Students and teachers speak extremely highly of the impact of the International Baccalaureate although the course is no longer a viable option for the consortium.
- A wide range of enrichment activities increases students' experience of English. Opportunities for live theatre benefit almost all students in each year group. For example, during the inspection a theatre company was performing an adaptation of *Macbeth* to all Year 9 students and frequent trips to theatres involve whole year groups. One of the school's curriculum enrichment days allowed Year 8 students to apply their knowledge and skills as part of a newspaper editorial team. Key Stage 5 students attend lectures given by university academics.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are outstanding.

- The head of department leads a team that has a shared goal of ensuring that students leave school with high standards of attainment but also with an appreciation of English language and literature. The range of experience and expertise of the team adds to its success. Some teachers bring with them a significant amount of teaching and assessment experience. Those newer to the profession add value with their ideas of how to increase student engagement even further.
- The department is held in high regard and has been extremely well-supported by the senior leadership team. Professional development is encouraged and enabled. For example, one member of the department is currently seconded to a higher education institution.
- The school's self-evaluation in English is thorough and accurate. Monitoring and evaluation are exceptionally well developed and this results in areas for improvement being addressed with rigour. An example of this is the recent review of AS teaching and learning because of the department's disappointment in one aspect of the 2010 results.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- increasing the proportion of outstanding teaching by ensuring that all lessons give frequent and relevant opportunities for students to be actively engaged in their own learning
- extending the opportunities for students to engage with new technologies, such as using blogs and podcasting, as a routine part of English lessons.

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

James McNeillie
Her Majesty's Inspector