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Mrs J Fenn
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Fenn

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 15 and 16 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 nine lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is satisfactory.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is satisfactory.

- Standards are broadly average in GCSE English Language. Attainment in GCSE English Literature, taken by most students, is also broadly average. Mock examination results and internal assessments show that a slightly higher proportion of students are on track for grades A* to C in 2011.
- Attainment on entry to the school is average. Students make satisfactory progress in English between Year 7 and GCSE. In 2010, higher ability Year 11 girls made less progress than other groups. However, they are on track to make better progress this year with the additional support of a lunchtime revision class. Students with a statement of special educational needs and/or disabilities make good progress in English. Students made good progress in the GCSE English Literature course.

- In 2010, students made above average progress in A-level English Language and Literature courses. At AS-level, outcomes were satisfactory. In January 2011, Year 12 AS-level examination results showed significant improvement with half the students gaining an A grade, well above the examination board average.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is satisfactory.

- Teaching and learning in most observed lessons were good. However, inconsistencies in teaching have limited consistently good progress. In the best lessons observed, a few of which were outstanding, teachers led with real energy and enthusiasm. This successfully inspired students' confidence and enjoyment in reading and writing. Teachers' precise focus on skills successfully challenged students to acquire higher levels of competence in analysing text and in composing their writing. Relationships were managed positively and the working climate was productive. Questions were used effectively to stimulate dialogue and reflection. The sequence of activities was varied and well paced and methodically extended students' knowledge and understanding.
- In some teaching, the activity lacked sufficient interest and challenge which led to off-task behaviour and slower progress. Objectives were too general and explanations did not provide clear guidance on how students of different abilities would succeed. On occasion, the opportunity was missed for teaching assistants to lead the learning of small groups.
- In most teaching, assessment criteria are used effectively to guide learning. The marking of controlled assessments and end-of-unit assessments is detailed and constructive. Peer- and self-evaluation is used effectively in many classes. However, in a few Key Stage 3 classes, marking is intermittent and students receive insufficient feedback on what they need to do to get to the next level.
- In the sixth form, the best teaching is highly enthusiastic and focused sharply on what students need to learn. Lively debate and discussion take place. Students receive frequent, detailed and constructive feedback from teachers. In less effective lessons, the teacher tends to talk at students. Students take notes but they do not have sufficient opportunities to develop their own ideas and opinions.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum in English is good.

- Units of work have well-designed sequences of lessons with active learning that develops and consolidates skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening. Formal assessment takes place regularly and systematically. The curriculum has been reviewed to reflect recent developments. The Key Stage 3 curriculum has an increasing focus on the development of

language skills. Additional support for underachieving students has been strengthened. A literacy class has recently been introduced in Year 7. Provision for students with statements of special educational needs and/or disabilities, who make up a significant minority of students, is good. The use of the virtual learning environment is beginning to be well used for communicating with students and for managing homework.

- A collaboration with the art department resulted in an attractive publication of images and creative writing. Students participate in poetry competitions and the local literature festival. They have good opportunities to meet authors and see plays. Sixth-form students attend poetry readings and university open days and they take on responsibility of reading mentors in primary schools.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are good.

- The new joint leaders of English are energetic, have a strong vision for improvement and have implemented changes effectively. Their self-evaluation is clear and analytical and demonstrates an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the department. During the time they have been in post, they have made a significant impact in developing a skills-based curriculum, strengthening the use of assessment and improving the quality of lesson planning and the variety of learning activities. The coordinator of sixth-form English has led rapid improvement in AS-level outcomes. Sixth-form aspirations have been raised through activities outside school.
- The coherence of the department has been affected by staff absence and the number of staff who have a part-time role in the department. The leaders have yet to achieve consistency in the quality of teaching and the use of assessment. The English department is in transition and has a good capacity to improve.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the consistency of teaching and learning and the use of assessment so that:
 - all teaching matches students' needs and enthuses them
 - objectives and assessment criteria consistently guide precise steps in learning
 - the students make more rapid progress.

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

Bernard Campbell
Her Majesty's Inspector