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Dr C Ingate
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Dear Dr Ingate

Ofsted 2011–12 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 June 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; observation of 10 lessons; and a learning walk conducted jointly with you.

The overall effectiveness of English is good.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- Students' attainment is average. The school's accurate tracking system and evidence from this inspection indicate that attainment is set to increase further at the end of Key Stages 4 and 5.
- The progress students make from their starting points on entry to the school is good. The proportion of students making more than expected progress in English is above national average. Lesson observations and scrutiny of students' work confirmed that no groups make significantly less progress than their peers.
- Students have good attitudes to learning and enjoy English. They apply prior knowledge and skills well in writing, when responding to texts and in discussion. A particularly strong example of this was observed in a Year 10 lesson where one student drew on his knowledge of themes in 'Romeo and Juliet' to suggest how the group's analysis could be extended.

Students are also able to make connections between texts, for example linking religious symbolism to Gothic literature.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- There is a strong focus on learning in English lessons. This is apparent in how teachers introduce lessons to students but also in the way that students can explain what they are learning.
- Teachers' good subject knowledge and their own use of language in the classroom are used to challenge students in their thinking and expression. In one Year 8 lesson, more able students were asked to define a superhero. The teacher would not accept single word answers, instead insisting that they extend their responses. In another Year 8 lesson for students following the school's 'Pathway 2' curriculum, the teacher modelled the use of challenging vocabulary which gave students opportunities to extend their own use of English.
- Resources are used well by teachers, including information and communication technology (ICT), to stimulate thinking and ideas as well as enabling students to become involved in their own learning. However, some opportunities are missed for students to use ICT tools to enhance their work in English.
- There is some high-quality formative marking of students' work, with opportunities for them to respond to teachers' comments. Students are positive about the support that teachers give to them when they need to improve their work. However, the quality and regularity of marking are too variable; this is sometimes, although not always, linked to the fact that classes are shared by one or more teachers. This area for development is part of the department's action plan.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum in English is satisfactory.

- The curriculum in English provides students with an appropriate balance of opportunities to develop reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. A range of good-quality traditional and contemporary texts is studied at all key stages. The Key Stage 5 curriculum is varied, engages students' interest and presents them with opportunities to experience lectures from university academics. The school's 'Pathway 2 curriculum' is supporting well those students who join the school with low levels of literacy.
- Particularly during Key Stage 3, students have few opportunities to engage with new technologies or media to learn new or apply existing skills as part of their study of English. Students do not always see the relevance of English in supporting their wider academic and personal development. This is, in part, because there is not currently a coordinated approach to including a range of real, relevant and purposeful contexts as part of the curriculum.

- Some enrichment activities are offered to support students' experience of English, such as a visiting author talking to Year 7 students and a theatre trip for older students to watch 'An Inspector Calls'. However, the school acknowledges that the number and variety of enrichment activities have dwindled in recent years because of a large turnover of staff and the important focus on improving classroom practice.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

The effectiveness of leadership and management in English is good.

- A new head of faculty joined the school in January 2011. He has a clear vision that is shared by the team and has an effective action plan in place to tackle areas for development. One of these, related to a more strategic approach to intervention for underperforming students in Year 11, has already had a good impact.
- Monitoring and evaluation systems are good and lead to honest and accurate self-evaluation. This is evident in the consistent agreement between the inspection findings and the school's own hypotheses.
- The department is well supported by the senior leadership team, including during the subject leadership hiatus. There is a clear balance between offering constructive challenge and supporting the plans of the new head of faculty.
- There is good capacity for improvement: the department knows its strengths and weaknesses well and has clear plans in place to develop these; the quality of teaching is improving; and the learning and progress of students are also improving.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring the quality of marking is more consistently effective by:
 - reviewing the department's assessment policy
 - ensuring that students have regular opportunities to reflect on and respond to feedback.
- enhancing the quality of the curriculum by:
 - integrating opportunities to develop and apply ICT skills and use new technologies as part of the English curriculum
 - increasing the range of real, purposeful and relevant contexts within the curriculum
 - incorporating more regular opportunities for all students in every year to experience enrichment activities.

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