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Mr P Gillis
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Gillis

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 14 and 15 September 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 good.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- After a dip, attainment in English is now average and rising well. Provisional GCSE results for 2011 indicate continued improvement. Nearly three quarters of students attained grade C or higher and 15% attained A or A*.
- Students' current work reflects a continuing rise in attainment across the age range. Students enjoy English lessons, do their best, and generally make good progress in lessons. They respond willingly to extra help if they need to catch up. A large majority of students now make the expected progress from their starting points, and a growing minority do better. Students are beginning to show initiative and enthusiasm, although there is scope to improve basic skills and independence.

- Sixth form students make satisfactory progress in English literature and media studies, and achieve broadly average outcomes.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Strengths of teaching include positive relationships with students and teachers' use of their subject knowledge to make lessons feel relevant and interesting and to help learners understand. Lessons usually have a clear structure and involve engaging and varied activities such as drama and discussion. In some of the observed lessons, good opportunities for group work and clear, concise and well-targeted questioning moved students' understanding forward particularly well.
- However, opportunities were sometimes missed to teach basic skills effectively. This was because explanations were not clear, or because teachers did not give students good opportunities to apply their skills independently. Sometimes resources, including modern technology, were not exploited to the full to involve students in reading closely or refining writing.
- Teachers' use of assessment is improving. They carefully track students' progress towards their targets and effectively adapt teaching approaches and resources as needs are identified. Clearer expectations for guiding students' written work are currently being met.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum in English is satisfactory.

- The curriculum offers students a satisfactory range of experiences. It is currently being refreshed to improve progression in basic skills. More use is being made of drama and a wider range of speaking and listening activities. Reading and writing skills are being more explicitly taught and practised. Although it is too soon for monitoring to have shown clear impact, the new schemes have promising features, including adaptation for different levels of attainment and more scope for independence and creativity.
- Students appreciate the extra classes and individual tutoring they have. More able and talented students have responded well to recent enrichment opportunities which have developed higher-level writing skills.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

The effectiveness of leadership and management in English is satisfactory.

- The head of English shows strong commitment to the subject and the students. He accepted the need to halt declining attainment, and with considerable support from senior leaders, the local authority and the teaching team, has implemented clear priorities for improvement effectively.

- Self-evaluation is broadly accurate. Systems to ensure that students make at least the expected progress are now well established. Regular monitoring has improved consistency in teaching and staff share effective practice. Two new assistant subject leaders are working thoughtfully to update the curriculum and sharpen day-to-day assessment in Key Stages 3 and 4. The impact on current achievement and the quality of teaching has been positive and demonstrates a good capacity to improve further.
- However, as the school recognises, more remains to be done to clarify guidance on key aspects of teaching English, embed consistency and tackle areas which are no better than satisfactory, including sixth form provision.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising attainment further by:
 - teaching basic skills more effectively within a progressive curriculum
 - providing better opportunities for students to develop their skills independently
- ensuring that consistently effective marking and feedback lead students to make more rapid progress in all areas of English.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop English in the school.

As 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. A copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Susan Bowles
Her Majesty's Inspector