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Mrs L Mansbridge
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Mansbridge

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 12 and 13 October 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 with some outstanding features.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- Attainment has risen substantially over the past two years and is now above average at the end of Key Stage 4. The school enters most students for GCSE English Literature and the 2011 results also improved to above average.
- Progress is good for most students across Key Stages 3 and 4. Some students, including some for whom English is an additional language, make outstanding progress from their starting points. Boys do well but do not yet match the levels of progress achieved by girls. All groups of students make good progress in English, including some groups who performed less well in the past. Black Caribbean students do particularly well in comparison with the national trend.

- Achievement is not yet as strong in the sixth form as in the rest of the school. However, A level English Literature results improved last year. Standards were closer to the national average and progress was very good.
- Students are keen to learn. They behave very well and try hard in lessons. Behaviour is generally excellent. They support each other well in small groups and listen carefully to their teacher and other students.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Students speak very highly of teaching in English. They enjoy English and particularly appreciate the support offered by teachers, both in lessons and for catch-up sessions, where needed.
- Strengths of teaching include: very good relationships; the use of varied and at times creative approaches and resources; teachers' enthusiasm and subject knowledge; clear emphasis on students' understanding of the assessment criteria; well-planned oral work; and some developing opportunities for students to work independently.
- Learning was sometimes limited, in the lessons observed, by a lack of clarity about the intended learning, with too much emphasis on activities and a hasty pace. In these lessons, teachers missed opportunities to monitor students' learning before moving on to the next task. There were also times when the use of indiscriminating praise reduced the potential challenge for more able students.
- Students have a good understanding of how to improve their work. This is because marking is often excellent. Teachers give students detailed feedback on their work, with helpful pointers for improvement. They also identify individual errors and make helpful corrections to their writing.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum in English is good.

- The curriculum is well planned and generates consistency in students' experience across classes. It is broad and balanced. Drama, speaking and listening are all well promoted. Students have fewer opportunities at present to use information and communication technology, including moving image technology, in their English lessons.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum has been well structured around the needs of the students, including boys. Some innovative units of work include a transition unit in Year 7, a unit on oral communication, and the Openings scheme of work. Individual teachers promote independent reading well.
- The department provides a substantial amount of high-quality support outside lessons for students and this makes a positive contribution to the improvements in GCSE results. Theatre visits, occasional visits by writers, and debating events help to enrich the curriculum further.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

The effectiveness of leadership and management in English is good.

- Highly effective leadership has led to a considerable improvement in achievement over recent years.
- The department is well led. The head of department has been successful in creating a consistent ethos across the department and a strong sense of direction. She sets high expectations and is well supported by a hard-working and dedicated team.
- The school's self-evaluation in English is accurate and realistic. This is based on a good range of monitoring activities including regular feedback from students and initiatives to ensure that parents and carers are aware of targets in English and can support their children's work.
- Departmental action planning is detailed and well focused on outcomes for students. It identifies aspects of teaching to be developed, including questioning and assessment, but would benefit from more detailed analysis of teaching strengths and weaknesses across this very large department.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising achievement in the sixth form to match recent improvements across Key Stages 3 and 4
- increasing the proportion of good and outstanding teaching by:
 - improving the emphasis on learning and progress for students in teachers' lesson planning
 - more effective monitoring of the progress of all students during lessons.

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

Philip Jarrett
Her Majesty's Inspector