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Mr R Hodges
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Dear Mr Hodges

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 28 and 29 November 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 parts of eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is good.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good and improving.

- Students' attainment by the end of Year 11 is above average and improving. A higher proportion achieved GCSE grades A* and A than average in 2011. This profile is similar at the end of Year 9 where attainment is also above average, especially at Level 6 or better.
- Students in Year 11 make good progress from their starting points which are broadly average when they enter Year 7. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities also make good progress.
- In lessons, students make generally good progress. They settle to work promptly and work together well in pairs and small groups, enjoying practical tasks. They are generally keen to answer teachers' questions, although they are not always given sufficient time to think and discuss with others so that they can provide extended responses.

- Attainment on English courses by the end of Year 13 is above average and students make good progress. However, it is not as strong in Year 12.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge and plan lessons with clear learning objectives. In the best lessons, teachers ensure that students fully understand key terms so that they know what they should learn.
- Teachers form good working relationships with students and set generally high expectations for them. They use a wide range of approaches and maintain the pace of lessons to support learning. They combine reading, writing and speaking activities well. However, although most lessons have an extension task, teachers do not always match work closely enough to students' differing abilities so that they are challenged at the right level.
- In the best lessons, teachers use a good range of questions to check students' understanding and to probe their ideas further. However, this is not the case in all lessons and some students are not challenged to expand on their answers or teachers complete the answer themselves.
- Assessment is a strength of the department. Systems for monitoring students' progress and providing them with guidance on how to improve their work are very consistent. Teachers mark students' work thoroughly and set clear targets for improvement. Teachers are successfully trialling target cards which contain all the recent recommendations so that they are immediately available to students as they work.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum in English is good and improving.

- The curriculum is broad and covers poetry, non-fiction, media and Shakespeare throughout Key Stage 3. However, although teachers choose topics, where possible, to engage students' interest, such as mystery and ghost stories, they do not always make clear how the skills developed will be relevant in later study, especially at GCSE. At Key Stage 4, the curriculum has improved with increased flexibility on when students take GCSE English and subsequent regrouping to focus students on particular aspects of the course. This has improved students' achievement steadily in the last three years.
- Schemes of work are clear and well-organised with relevant objectives and coordinated assessment tasks. Students also benefit from a good range of additional support, including an effective reading programme in Years 7 and 8, and individual tuition. The good range of enrichment activities includes regular opportunities to enter competitions, attend the theatre and meet visiting authors. Year 10 students recently worked with a stand-up comedian to learn how to use humour in their writing.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

The effectiveness of leadership and management in English is good and improving.

- The subject leaders set a clear direction for English based on high expectations of achievement. They set clear aims, supported by effective policies which are applied consistently. Staff work well as a team, collaborating on planning and sharing expertise and resources.
- The subject leaders know the strengths of the team, including the quality of teaching, and have an accurate understanding of areas for development. This analysis informs relevant and detailed action plans which are well-supported by regular staff training and the sharing of effective practice.
- The subject leaders have identified relevant priorities for improvement, based on thorough monitoring of provision and analysis of students' achievement. Staff monitor students' progress closely and identify anyone at risk of underachievement promptly, providing effective support and intervention. These activities are reviewed and practice is constantly amended to ensure that it continues to meet students' needs. Recent improvements in the flexibility of the curriculum at Key Stage 4 and increased focus on targeted teaching of specific aspects of GCSE courses have helped to raise achievement.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the consistency of teaching by ensuring that all teachers:
 - match work closely to the differing abilities of students
 - use a wide range of questions to check students' understanding and help them to extend their ideas
- reviewing the curriculum in Key Stage 3 to highlight and develop the skills necessary for further study at GCSE and beyond.

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

Martin Cragg
Her Majesty's Inspector