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Mrs P Hanrahan
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Dear Mrs Hanrahan

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 6 and 7 March 2012 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 including evaluation and planning, the subject handbook and schemes of work; analysis of a range of students' work; and observation of six lessons as well as short observations of other activities to promote literacy.

The overall effectiveness of English is satisfactory and improving.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is satisfactory.

- The quality of learning observed ranged from satisfactory to good. Students cooperate well and, when given appropriate opportunities, participate enthusiastically, showing ambition, perseverance and originality. They like English lessons and see the subject as useful. However, their skills in speaking and listening, reading and writing are not well enough developed for them to learn well independently and enjoy the subject as fully as they might.
- Attainment in GCSE English is broadly average and all groups of students are now making the progress which is expected of them. This is a significant improvement on the past two years, when boys and more-able

students underachieved in English and English Literature. New approaches are making a positive difference.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is satisfactory.

- Teaching shows many good features which are strengthening students' enjoyment and accelerating their progress.
- Teachers use an increasingly varied range of activities to engage students' interest, provoke thought and exercise their skills. For example, one teacher used modern technology to strip Martin Luther King's well-known speech of its emotive language. This prompted students to read more perceptively and write some forcefully persuasive letters. Students enjoy their opportunities for learning through practical activities. Lessons include plenty of question and answer exchanges, some led with real skill by teachers. Students have some opportunities to ask their own questions and explore substantial questions in small groups, but teachers tend to do more of the talking.
- The use of assessment is another developing strength. Teachers adapt their plans to students' well-understood needs and check their understanding. Teachers share their expectations with students, but students sometimes struggle to understand the higher level objectives they are set. Teachers mark and correct work regularly and refer helpfully to curricular targets. However, this form of dialogue with students is rather one-sided. Until they tackle GCSE coursework, there is little sign that students take effective action on advice.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum in English is satisfactory.

- Students experience a well-balanced range of texts and tasks which help them make progress in the different areas of English. They study and, in some cases, make films. Reading is brought to life through discussion and drama. Students are expected to communicate more formally when appropriate and, by writing articles and campaign posters about real events in the community, come to see how English is relevant beyond school.
- The curriculum is kept under review and teachers have worked together to make schemes and resources more relevant to students' needs and interests. Novels and poems for class study have been selected with boys in mind, and this has helped improve the quality of their learning.
- The department is contributing to whole-school initiatives to improve literacy, although these are not yet well embedded enough to show clear impact. Interventions to help those who join the school with low levels of literacy show promising signs of effect. For example, reluctant readers have been successfully re-motivated through skilful small group teaching which uses appealing new books and gives priority to understanding and

enjoyment. Research is incorporated in some schemes of work and wider reading is promoted through homework activities, class book selections and special events.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

The effectiveness of leadership and management in English is satisfactory.

- Achievement has improved in English because of hard work at every level to raise the quality of provision. This has been effectively led by a subject leader who understands best practice in English teaching and has shared responsibility with a committed team.
- The drive for improvement has been helpfully supported by the school's senior leadership team. Self-evaluation at subject level is unevenly effective in using a wide range of indicators to identify priorities, in planning specific improvements and evaluating impact. However, relevant good practice is being shared within the team. Teachers are encouraged to learn from each other and clear guidance, monitoring and feedback have helped them understand and apply agreed approaches.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- embedding strategies to strengthen all students' literacy, and setting higher expectations for students' independent use of their skills
- improving the balance between talk by teachers and by students
- helping students understand and achieve higher expectations, by giving them better opportunities to work out how to meet challenging objectives and time to act on marking and feedback.

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