

Aviation House  
125 Kingsway  
London  
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231  
F 020 7421 6855  
[enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
[www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)



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Mr D Anderson  
Headteacher  
Queen Elizabeth Grammar School  
Abbey Place  
Faversham  
Kent  
ME13 7BQ

Dear Mr Anderson

### **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 7 and 8 March 2012 to look at work in English. I appreciated the cheerful clarity and openness with which everyone answered questions and showed me their work.

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 10 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is good with some outstanding features.

### **Achievement in English**

Achievement in English is good.

- Overall attainment is well above average at the end of Key Stage 4, with excellent results in GCSE English Language over at least three years. In 2011, over half of the cohort gained A\* or A. While still strong, results in English Literature dipped in 2011, with just over a fifth gaining the top grades. The few students who are known to be eligible for free schools meals or to have special educational needs and/or disabilities achieve as well as their contemporaries and much better than similar students nationally.
- A similar pattern is clear in the sixth form. English Language A-level results are outstanding, exceeding predictions based on GCSE attainment, and

show an upward trend. In A-level English Literature, just over half gained grades A\* to B in 2011 and the proportion has declined over three years.

- Students are keen to do well. They collaborate effectively, building on ideas and approaches developed through discussion. On occasion, however, a few more assertive students play a dominant role while others are swept along without making a significant contribution. Students' written work, including extended writing, is often lively and becomes more organised and technically accurate as students respond to detailed and constructive marking. While the most able rise with zest to challenges that stretch them, the level of challenge for these students is not always sufficiently high and this inhibits their progress. Steps are being taken to tackle this and the impact can be seen in some lessons. Progress observed during the inspection was uneven; it was outstanding on occasion but there were also instances when it was satisfactory.

### **Quality of teaching in English**

The quality of teaching in English is good with outstanding features.

- All teachers in the department have well-developed and confident skills. Most are English specialists, representing a comprehensive range of interests and expertise, so that all elements of the curriculum are well supported. Lesson plans set out clearly what students are to learn through a sequence of activities which are well designed to drive progress. Teachers have an excellent rapport with students, built on mutual respect and an infectious enthusiasm for the subject. When complemented by high expectations, this combination drives progress vigorously. In a Year 7 lesson, for example, students were clear that their response to poetry should never be simply 'cute' or 'nice'. In their own writing and in their exploration of a highly charged poem, they showed imagination and enjoyment.
- Sixth form teaching successfully encourages students to be independent and ambitious. For example, A-level students' thinking about Chaucer's 'The Pardoner's Tale' was clarified and challenged through an activity called 'Centre of the Universe'. At the centre was placed a critical judgement about the Pardoner or his tale and students demonstrated the degree of their personal agreement through the distance they stood from it – a position they then had to defend. In an AS English Language lesson, students were clearly challenged and engaged by an exploration of the linguistic devices used by a teacher working with very young children.
- Teachers' use of questions is often productive but, in less effective lessons, students are not consistently challenged to develop their first responses. The timing of activities is not always well judged. On occasion, students do not get enough done to feel a sense of achievement. The ends of lessons are sometimes rushed, leaving little time to check and reinforce students' understanding of the ground covered.

### **Quality of the curriculum in English**

The quality of the curriculum in English is outstanding.

- The two-year Key Stage 3 curriculum is successfully maintaining students' motivation. It leads students through texts and activities that capture their interest and lays secure foundations for the three-year Key Stage 4. The emphasis is on reading, writing and discussion. In Year 11, substantial time is allocated for 'enrichment', which encourages students to be independent and experimental in, for example, film and creative writing.
- In the sixth form, both Language and Literature are well supported, with about 30 students opting for each in Year 12. Scope for individual choice of text and topic is extremely well managed, with evident impact on students' motivation, confidence and readiness to work independently.
- An extensive and engaging extra-curricular programme includes a weekly cinema club, a poetry club, drama workshops, debating, theatre trips, visiting speakers and celebration of World Book Week.

### **Effectiveness of leadership and management in English**

The effectiveness of leadership and management in English is outstanding.

- All elements of provision established by the school's leadership and the subject leader reflect clear and practical aspirations. These are shaped by thorough and accurate evaluation of strengths and areas for development. Current priorities include sharpening teachers' use of assessment to reinforce and extend students' learning. The subject leader rightly emphasises the importance of students making connections between texts and having some choice in what they study. The success of recent strategies indicates strong capacity for further improvement.
- Although a heavy teaching commitment limits the subject leader's opportunities for monitoring teaching, departmental review by senior leaders is rigorous and sets well-targeted and productive priorities for whole staff and individual development.

### **Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:**

- ensuring that teaching consistently promotes independent and higher-order thinking, particularly in response to literature, challenging all students, including the most able.

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.

Yours sincerely

**Patricia Metham**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**