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Mr J Ford
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Dear Mr Ford

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 22 and 23 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; analysis of students' work; and observation of seven part-lessons.

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

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is outstanding.

- Attainment is well above average at the end of Key Stage 4 in both GCSE English and GCSE English Literature. Above average numbers of students also achieve grades A* or A in both courses. The gap between girls' and boys' attainment in English was much wider than the national average in 2011. However, this is not typical and evidence over recent years confirms that boys and girls both make at least good progress in English. The school's assessments show that the current cohort of boys in Year 11 is performing as well as the girls.
- In 2011, attainment was slightly below average at AS level and above average at A level. AS results have had some variability over the past three years but a rising trend is shown in A-level attainment. Progress in English in the sixth form is good overall.

- Students are keen to do well. Behaviour is good although some students were rather passive in lessons observed and needed encouragement to become more confident to voice their opinion. When prompted by teachers, they built ideas and approaches effectively through discussion. At times, some groups of students remained silent during group work activities.
- Students' written work, including extended writing, is often lively and technically accurate. Students respond positively to detailed and constructive marking with focused targets that stress the 'next steps' and enable them to make progress. While the most able students are articulate and confident in their writing, the level of challenge for these students is not always sufficiently high in lessons and this inhibits their progress. Progress in lessons observed was good overall but uneven in quality.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Most English teachers are subject specialists, with a comprehensive range of interests and expertise which supports the well-balanced curriculum. Teachers have an excellent rapport with students, built on mutual respect, and are passionate for the subject.
- Teachers' use of questions is effective in the most successful lessons. At other times, students, including the more able, are not always challenged beyond their immediate response. Where teachers make good use of 'open' questions and increase the 'wait-time' before students respond, the outcomes for students are significantly improved. Differentiation is not always sufficiently matched to the range of students in mixed ability groups.
- Sixth form teaching successfully encourages students to be ambitious. For example, A level students thinking about Victorian Literature were enthusiastically engaged and encouraged to voice their own opinion after exploring the work of Mary Wollstonecraft. Teachers at A level have good subject knowledge which helps students to understand their texts and the broader social context but too few opportunities are taken for independent learning that would enable students to become more autonomous.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum in English is good.

- A wide range of options is available at Key Stage 4 including English, English Literature, Media Studies and Drama. At A level, the curriculum is appropriate and encourages breadth and depth.
- Schemes of work at both Key Stages 3 and 4 meet students' needs well, especially where the balance of reading, writing, speaking and listening is effectively integrated. The department's strengths include some

imaginative approaches to the teaching of poetry which encourage both personal response and a detailed understanding of literary devices. Moreover, a strong commitment is given to independent reading and encouragement for students to read at the beginning of most lessons.

- The curriculum is enhanced by a wide range of extra-curricular provision including visits to theatres, poetry workshops, and visiting speakers. Support from the Special Educational Needs department and transition arrangements with primary schools are strong.
- The department has provided leadership on literacy across the curriculum with a nominated staff member who is actively drawing in other departments to work on aspects of literacy in order to support all students. This is having a positive outcome on students.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

The effectiveness of leadership and management in English is good.

- A strong sense of collegiality exists across the department, drawing on the strengths of teachers' expertise. This enables the department to foster a climate of mutual respect and purposeful working. However, a sharper analysis of performance data at classroom level can be undertaken in order for teachers to plan for different groups of students more effectively.
- The subject leader has clear aims for English and this is well documented in department policy. Teachers work well together and are keen to review practice and share ideas. Lesson plans are detailed and show a good understanding of how the imaginative use of resources leads to better outcomes for students.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that teaching consistently promotes independent work, challenging all students, including the most able
- developing a more sophisticated understanding of how data can support teachers' understanding of curriculum planning so that all groups of students can make rapid progress.

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

Kevin Morris
Additional Inspector