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Mr G Nelson
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Nelson

Ofsted 2012–13 subject survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 9 and 10 May 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 11 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is good.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- At GCSE, overall attainment is significantly above average. Those known to be eligible for free school meals do as well as their school contemporaries and better than similar students nationally. The gap between disabled students and those with special educational needs and others is now slight. Students at either end of the ability spectrum exceed predictions; students in the broad middle band do less well than others. The school has responded purposefully to this, through booster sessions, small group teaching and individual support, all of which are having a positive impact. Controlled assessments and results for those entered for GCSE English Language early indicate that the proportion gaining grades A* to C is likely to increase this year.

- Almost all students make good or better progress to achieve above average results in English Language and Literature by the end of Key Stage 4.
- Progress in Years 7 and 8 is never less than satisfactory but not as strong as in later years. The department is tackling this vigorously. For example, well-targeted literacy support in Year 8 and a project to engage poorly motivated students in Year 7 are proving effective. This was evident in a library-based session built round the interest in ghost stories expressed by otherwise reluctant learners. Students demonstrated skill as oral storytellers, using evocative detail, building up suspense confidently and holding their classmates' attention.
- In 2011, results for AS English Literature and AS English Language were well above average. At A level, over a third gained grades A* to B for English Language and Literature, and over two thirds of a large cohort gained grades A* to B for English Literature. Results in A level communication studies, taught by the English department, were exceptionally strong.
- Students across the ability range are keen to do well. They collaborate effectively, building on ideas and approaches developed through discussion. The substantial number opting for English in the sixth form is evidence of students' enjoyment and sense of achievement in Key Stage 4.

Quality of teaching in English

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

- Students in Key Stage 4 comment on the consistency of teaching in English: 'All are good teachers.' Sixth formers describe teaching as 'personal and individualised'. There are examples of outstanding practice. Among conspicuous strengths are: enthusiastic subject knowledge; lesson planning with a variety and sequence of activities well designed to reflect students' abilities; lively pace; confident use of resources; well-managed pair and group work; and marking that combines praise with specific guidance.
- In the few less effective lessons, the pace and the timing of activities are not always well judged; students are not challenged to develop their ideas fully; and opportunities for active and independent learning are limited.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum in English is good.

- The department is strengthening links with primary schools to ensure that it builds on prior learning. National Curriculum requirements are carefully covered and the department has a strong focus on reading. Innovative elements include approaches to literacy and engagement in Years 7 and 8, laying foundations for breadth of reading and active styles of learning in Year 9. Year 9 students' account of their exploration of Gothic literature

was enthusiastic: 'We got to make films and edit them. We learnt about key aspects of 'Gothic' through our adaptation of *Dracula*.'

- The range of options in Key Stage 4 meets all needs. Students are rightly confident that the texts and courses chosen for them will serve their interests well.
- Take-up for English-related options in the sixth form is strong. English Literature students feel that they are encouraged to be independent thinkers: 'Your interpretation matters.'
- The curriculum is enriched by activities organised through the library, such as: visits from writers including workshops in the local library; participation in national competitions; the accelerated reader programme; and training as junior librarians. In Key Stage 4, theatre trips are arranged by the department and, in the sixth form, students are encouraged to attend conferences and revision workshops as well as join theatre trips.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

The effectiveness of leadership and management in English is good.

- You and your senior team set clear and ambitious targets, with a whole-school focus on improving teaching and learning. The department's self-evaluation is thorough and realistic. Teaching and curriculum provision are under review, carefully linked to national trends, for example in developing reading and ensuring that students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is strongly promoted through choice of text and topic.
- The department has a practical approach to professional development; small staff teams, led by senior teachers, create valuable opportunities to share good practice and to evaluate the impact of interventions.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that expectations for students of all abilities in Years 7 and 8 and for the middle ability band in Key Stage 4 are challenging and promote independent learning.

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

Patricia Metham
Her Majesty's Inspector