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Mrs J Crow
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Crow

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 18–19 March 2013 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; observation of 11 English lessons; and a brief drop-in to Year 9 withdrawal groups for literacy support.

The overall effectiveness of English is good.

Achievement in English is good.

- Students make good progress in English. They are enthusiastic and purposeful learners. They read and write confidently for different purposes and in a range of contexts. They work effectively in groups and collaborate constructively. Good relationships with teachers enable them to contribute confidently and voluntarily to their learning. They ask questions eagerly. They adapt their speech appropriately for different purposes. Books are well kept and show hard work and pride in presentation.
- From below average starting points, students generally achieve English GCSE results broadly in line with the national average. In 2012, the proportion achieving a grade C or higher dipped; however, in the same year, there was an increase in A and A* grades. The proportion making expected progress is similar to the national average, with significant numbers exceeding this and making better-than-average progress. Students leaving primary school with low attainment scores and those with

special educational needs do especially well, attaining higher-than-average GCSE points scores. Gaps in performance, for example between students eligible for free school meals and their peers, or between boys and girls, are narrowing.

- Sixth form students achieve well on English literature courses. In 2012 AS level students achieved particularly well, making significantly better-than-average progress from their starting points.

Teaching in English is good.

- Lessons are well planned and draw on a range of high-quality and engaging resources. Purposeful, well-structured discussion is a common feature. Learning moves at a brisk pace. Students can confidently explain their targets and how well they are doing, using the school's 'QCA points' system. They enjoy the school's creative approaches to learning. One student explained this as the development of 'good habits of mind', such as 'striving for accuracy' by carefully checking spelling, grammar and punctuation.
- English teachers mark books regularly with comments that praise and reinforce good work. The best marking also offers precise and well-targeted advice for improvement, which students act upon. Such high-impact marking is not consistent across the department, however.
- Teachers use the school's 'thinking school' planning format constructively to meet students' diverse needs. They know individual students' needs and abilities well, but vary in their ability to group, question or challenge students in different ways to make sure they are stretched. For example, some teachers target questioning and give students time to think, returning to probe or develop answers, but this practice is not consistent or widespread enough.

The curriculum in English is good.

- The curriculum provides a good balance of texts and an appropriate focus on basic literacy skills. From Year 7, students gain an understanding of the influence of major writers such as Chaucer, Dickens and Austen, as well as studying a range of non-fiction and media texts.
- Students say that the recently implemented whole-school reading strategy is making them better, more regular readers. They are proud that library loans have soared and that some of them appear on the '100% Wall' - a roll of honour for scoring full marks in quizzes taken at the end of each book read.
- Effective arrangements ensure that students at risk of falling behind catch up. This includes: small group, focused literacy work; after school GCSE intervention to reach target grades; and one-to-one support for students who need extra help to become good readers. Time given to English has increased, resulting in smaller GCSE classes, focusing on specific target

grades. Students practise their literacy skills during tutor time and have silent reading time at the beginning of English lessons.

Leadership and management of English are good.

- The English subject leader has provided stability and maintained high standards of teaching through a period of considerable staffing instability. The department is now fully staffed, with a good balance of experienced teachers and some new or relatively new to the profession. Talented new teachers are bringing creativity and fresh approaches to the subject; experienced practitioners are supporting the development of A level teaching and sound classroom management skills.
- The head of department is passionate about English and determined that all students will experience high quality teaching and achieve well. Along with senior leaders, he monitors and reviews provision regularly and rigorously. The department's self-evaluation is robust and accurate.
- The team contributes strongly to whole-school literacy and to students' love of books and reading. Devoting a portion of each English lesson to silent reading is keeping the profile of reading high throughout the school. However, leaders have not yet evaluated how far this contributes to sustained independent reading habits, or whether there may be alternative approaches, such as shared and group reading, that might benefit reluctant or less able readers.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- developing teachers' capacity to target and stretch students of differing abilities so that all students, including the most able, are challenged to think deeply and articulate their learning fully
- ensure that all marking is as precise and developmental as the best in the department and that students use it effectively to improve their work
- evaluate the impact of dedicated reading time in English lessons, to establish how effectively it contributes to the development of independent, habitual and committed readers.

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

Christine Raeside
Her Majesty's Inspector