

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Ms L Kirby
Headteacher
Richmond Park Academy
Park Avenue
East Sheen
London
SW1 8RG

Dear Ms Kirby

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 23 and 24 April 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; observations of nine lessons; visits to a paired reading session and a public speaking preparation event.

The overall effectiveness of English is good.

Achievement in English is good.

- Attainment by all groups in English Language GCSE has risen over the last two years. The proportion of students achieving grade A* to C increased by eight percentage points from 2011 to 2012 and the academy's tracking indicates that this improvement is set to continue. In 2012, the average points score gained by students known to be eligible for pupil premium funding was higher than for all students nationally. The use of a range of targeted interventions, based on precise analysis of progress, enabled these students to achieve well. The proportion of students in Key Stage 3 making expected progress has risen rapidly and significant numbers are making good progress towards the academy's challenging targets.
- Students show commitment to their learning and are keen to succeed. They work well in groups and are eager to answer questions. Good

relationships with teachers enable them to make thoughtful and confident contributions to lessons. A recent and sharper focus on improving students' technical skills has improved the quality of their writing. One student explained the impact of this approach, 'I am much more confident about proof-reading my work now. It has made me a better writer'.

- In 2012, when almost all students were entered for GCSE English Literature, the proportion of A* to C grades was below average. This year two sets are following a combined English syllabus which is designed for those who find aspects of the English Language and Literature pathway especially challenging. These students are benefiting from carefully targeted individual support.

Teaching in English is good.

- Lessons are well-planned and resources are interesting and engaging. Students speak highly of the confidence they have in their teachers' commitment, knowledge and skills. In almost all of the lessons observed, teachers' skilful questioning and clarity of explanation enabled students to make good or better progress.
- In the most effective lessons, teachers make use of inspirational approaches which motivate and challenge students to develop their thinking, enabling them to make rapid gains in knowledge and skills. In a Year 7 lesson, for example, students were discussing their ideas about the symbolism of an image which related to the themes of the class novel. This resulted in a high-level discussion, during which all students were keen to participate and build on each other's contributions.
- Students can confidently explain their targets and the progress they are making. Marking is regular and comments are helpful. Occasionally, teachers do not identify areas for improvement precisely enough and students are unclear about the next steps they are expected to take to improve their work. This department has recently introduced a more focused marking policy, in response to an area identified for development by Ofsted in 2012, but this is not yet used consistently. This forms part of an academy-wide strategy to improve marking.

The curriculum in English is good.

- The curriculum provides a balanced range of texts and a clear focus on improving literacy skills. Students gain an understanding of the influence of major writers and also respond enthusiastically to media units of study, which include the analysis of the language used in websites and blogs. Year 8 spoke with enthusiasm about the Gothic fiction unit of study and associated creative writing task. In addition, students were highly motivated by the extended 'Identity' homework task; they would like to do more of this type of independent study. The broad range of enrichment activities is valued by students. These activities include public speaking, debating, a book club and poetry workshops.

- The academy has effective arrangements in place to ensure that students at risk of falling behind catch up. These include small group literacy work and one-to-one support for students who need extra help with improving reading or writing. The department takes care to ensure that students are thoroughly prepared for assessments and examinations, including providing additional tuition on Saturdays.
- The academy's commitment to developing confident readers, including the 'Drop Everything and Read' strategy and a well-structured reading programme have proved very effective in promoting reading across all year groups. In addition, the academy's recently introduced paired reading scheme, involving trained Year 11 students working with Year 7 students, is well-attended and effective.

Leadership and management of English are good.

- The head of department has provided stability and effectively developed the skills of teachers within the department, after a period of change. There is now a good balance of more experienced teachers and some who are relatively new to the profession. New teachers are bringing creative and innovative approaches to the subject; more experienced practitioners are supporting this through curriculum development and sound classroom management skills.
- The senior team and head of department have a clear picture of the strengths and areas for development in the department. This is based on regular tracking of student progress and careful monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning, through focused lesson observations.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that all teachers in the English department maintain and build on their high expectations of what students of all abilities can achieve, so that students are challenged to think deeply and develop greater independence in their learning
- fully embedding the new marking system across the department and ensuring that students make effective use of this to improve their work.

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

Russell Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector