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3 December 2013

Dr A Kay
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Dear Dr Kay

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 20 and 21 November 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; and observation of 10 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English requires improvement.

Achievement in English requires improvement.

- From broadly average starting points, most students make at least satisfactory or better progress in English. However, the progress of a few students whose attainment is lower than others' on entry to the school has not matched that of their peers nationally. Girls make better progress than their peers nationally and boys within the school. Leaders' strategies to improve the achievement of boys and lower attaining students have not yet resulted in improvements.
- Over time, standards of attainment in GCSE English language have been above average. However, in 2013 results dipped significantly and are now in line with the national average. Senior leaders and teachers in the department did not anticipate this drop.

- Students who entered the newly established Sixth form for the first time this year are making good progress from their starting points in A level courses. Teachers set challenging targets and students respond keenly.

Teaching in English requires improvement.

- The quality of teaching over time requires improvement. Current practice, particularly in the new sixth form, is stronger. English teachers are fully aware of those students that are vulnerable to under-achieve and are setting more challenging targets than in the past. Students' work is now regularly marked and, on most occasions, combines affirmation with specific guidance on how to improve. However, there are inconsistencies in practice, which is why teaching is not currently good overall.
- The head of department has correctly focused on developing teachers' skills to promote independence in students' learning, in order to increase the level of challenge for all students, particularly boys. This was very evident in the best lessons observed, where teachers planned a range of tasks, effectively tailored to students' abilities. Progress in these lessons was good because teachers checked students' learning effectively, adapting their plans where necessary to ensure no-one was held back.
- Sometimes learning lacks challenge or is too superficial. When this happens it is because teachers are not using students' targets or current results to inform either their plans or the execution of their lessons. As a result, some students, particularly boys do not fulfil their potential.

The curriculum in English requires improvement.

- At all stages, care is taken to prepare students thoroughly for formal assessments and examinations. Students in Key Stages 4 and 5 are very clear that course content both meets their needs and is relevant. They were less enthusiastic about topics and texts followed in the past in Key Stage 3. Some felt that, in the past, lessons were occasionally boring or lacking in challenge. However, some aspects of the Key Stage 3 offer have already been changed, with a full review scheduled for this year.
- The importance of reading is well understood, and all teachers encourage students to bring books into school and to read widely. The school employs a full-time librarian. Since the last full inspection, the stock has been re-vamped and the entire resource has been re-furbished during the summer vacation. Students with whom I spoke, value the advice of the librarian and greatly welcomed the improvements to the resource.
- Alongside teachers within the English department, the librarian regularly organises competitions and opportunities for students to meet with poets and writers. Students find these valuable. A recent connection with a local publishing company in Oxford yielded much-appreciated opportunities for students to proof read a children's novel. This has since led to work-experience placements with the same publishers. Teamwork between the librarian and the head of English is a particular strength.

- English involvement in supporting the development of literacy across the school is in its infancy, as leaders acknowledge. However, some valuable strategies are currently underway, such as the helpful links between PE and English, through which the head of English has helped PE teachers develop their skill to support extended writing and analysis.

Leadership and management of English require improvement.

- The head of English has a clear vision for the department and is determined to secure high standards of teaching and achievement. She has successfully moved the department from a low base after a period of unstable leadership and has effectively addressed inadequate teaching. She has excellent subject expertise and is able to successfully model the outstanding practice to which she aspires for all members of the team.
- Senior leaders acknowledge that they could have provided greater support for the head of department in the past. However, since September this has been correctly addressed. A recent external review of the department affirmed her judgements of what needs further improvement and the areas in which a few teachers have not adhered to departmental policy.
- Departmental action plans are correctly focused on the most urgent priorities for improvement. However, there is insufficient detail of what aspects of teaching require improvement and in relation to which groups of students. Although this level of detail is available in other documentation, its absence in the action plans result in a lack of ownership on the part of some teachers, who are failing to make the connections between the improvement priorities and their own teaching.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- strengthening the departmental action plan so that all staff are clear about the specific aspects of teaching that require improvement and are equally aware of how they will be individually supported to make the necessary improvements
- developing teachers' skills and expertise in using assessment information to plan and organise their lessons effectively so that all students, including boys and the less-able, meet their full potential.

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

Lesley Farmer
Her Majesty's Inspector