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Mr M Mullins  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Mullins

### **Ofsted 2013–14 subject survey inspection programme: English**

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit with Michael Maddison, Her Majesty's Inspector, on 10 and 11 December 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 observations of eight lessons, including some with senior leaders.

### **The overall effectiveness of English requires improvement.**

#### **Achievement in English requires improvement.**

- Attainment in GCSE English Language and Literature is high. However, there has been a decline over the last two years, especially in English Language. Fewer gained A\* or A grades in 2013 than in 2011 even though students' starting points at the end of Key Stage 2 were higher. In 2013, students' relative performance was lower in GCSE English Language and Literature than in their other subjects.
- Rates of progress, which were high, have declined. In 2013, of those who entered the school with National Curriculum Level 5c, fewer than average made the expected three levels of progress to gain a GCSE grade B. In addition, fewer than average at Level 5c and 5b made four levels of progress to gain grade A. The proportion making five levels of progress to gain A\* also declined.

- In the sixth form, in 2013, students at AS level made better progress than average in English Language and English Literature. At A level students made average progress.
- Most students learn well, enjoy reading in lessons, write confidently and engage seriously in intellectual discussion and analysis of texts.

### **Teaching in English is good.**

- Teaching is now accurately targeted at student needs but the impact is not yet apparent in GCSE and A-level results. Good questioning and commentary prompts thoughtful and articulate responses to plays, poems and novels. Convincing explanations of the social and historical context of literature extend students' understanding of text and character. A good range of resources and practical approaches help students to organise their writing and responses to text. The best teaching challenges students with demanding texts and ideas. Enthusiastically presented and imaginative activities extend and deepen understanding of language, character and meaning.
- In good sixth form teaching, tasks are pitched at different levels to match the range of abilities, well-planned resources enable students to work independently and the teacher gives good personal attention to the particular needs of individual students.
- Teaching does not always draw sufficiently on students' responses to deepen their understanding or develop more sophisticated uses of language. On occasion, the link between particular uses of language and the criteria for different levels is not precise enough to guide students' understanding of how to succeed.
- Marking gives specific and personal comments on the use of grammar and the skills displayed. Regular and well-documented formal assessments identify strengths and specify what to improve. Teachers systematically identify obstacles for students making less than expected progress and implement strategies to support them. This approach is not applied with sufficient rigour to students who could make faster-than-average progress to reach higher targets more quickly.

### **The curriculum in English is good.**

- The well-organised Key Stage 3 curriculum provides a clear framework of topics, objectives and planned assessment. The curriculum structure fosters collaboration between teachers in the planning of lessons.
- A good range of written and media texts and a variety of approaches promote strong engagement in learning. Students in all years, including the sixth form, are encouraged to read widely. Independent study and intellectual discussion are promoted well. The work of sixth form mentors with weaker Year 7 and 8 students encourages their enjoyment in reading.
- Early entry for exams in Year 10 meant that time on language and literature was unbalanced. Early entry stopped and the Key Stage 4 curriculum is now appropriately balanced. Advice from examiners has

strengthened the GCSE English Language and A level Literature courses. Students are doing more assessed tasks to increase the opportunities to demonstrate their skills. The number of teaching groups in English has been increased in order improve the context for teaching and learning.

- A new librarian has begun to re-organise and replenish old stock in order to make the library a more stimulating resource for reading for pleasure. Theatre and cinema visits regularly enrich the study of novels and drama. A visit to Wales stimulates creative writing in the sixth form.

### **Leadership and management of English require improvement.**

- Quality assurance procedures for teaching, marking and feedback, are applied consistently.
- Leaders have not focused on the faster progress made nationally by high-attaining students. The department development plan does not include measurable targets for the faster progress needed by more able students to gain A\* and A grades.
- At Key Stage 3, teachers accurately record the individuals who make faster or slower progress than expected. Departmental systems ensure that teachers take action to increase the progress of slower students. However, leaders do not systematically identify the students who could be making faster progress and take action to ensure that they do.
- Furthermore, leaders do not analyse data to evaluate and improve the performance of different student groups, classes or year groups, including the more able. In Year 11, analysis and action are now more rigorous. Leaders are about to implement a new school tracking system which is intended to sharpen evaluation and action.
- Early entry for GCSE English Language in Year 10 contributed to lower GCSE outcomes. Leaders are strongly aware of its negative impact and acted robustly this year to provide more targeted support for Year 11. They assessed students and re-organised classes to target teaching on what students need to do to get to higher levels. It is too early to see the impact of this more focused and flexible approach on GCSE results.

### **Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:**

- sharpening the analysis of data and evaluation of performance in English in all years, in order to take accurately-targeted and prompt action to ensure that students, especially the more able, consistently reach the high levels of attainment they are capable of.

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

**Bernard Campbell**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**