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Ms L Miller-Marshall
Principal
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Dear Ms Miller-Marshall

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 on 28 and 29 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 joint observations with senior leaders of thirteen lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English requires improvement.

Achievement in English requires improvement.

- Attainment in English has been broadly average over the past three years, although it dipped in 2012. Students' attainment on entry to the school is broadly average.
- Following curriculum changes and more sharply focused monitoring and interventions by your school and subject leaders, low-achieving and more-able students are now making better progress. However, achievement overall requires improvement as it is not yet consistently good for all students. The gap in achievement for those supported by additional government funding (the pupil premium) is closing in response to well-targeted interventions but not yet quickly enough.
- While weaknesses in spelling and handwriting mean that some students have difficulty in writing down their ideas quickly, all are eager to learn

and they behave well in English lessons. They express their views confidently and articulately, and are beginning to read more widely.

Teaching in English has strengths but requires improvement.

- Examples of effective teaching are increasing in response to monitoring and well-directed support. Teaching still requires improvement overall because it is not yet consistently meeting the needs of all students in the mixed ability classes. While lesson-planning is now more often geared to students' diverse abilities and approaches, not all teachers continually check and extend students' learning during the lesson, and adapt activities, the pace and their questions to ensure all make good progress.
- Teachers mark students' work regularly. Written comments do not always explain precisely and in an easily understood way how students can raise their work to the next level.
- Strengths in teaching include positive relationships between staff and students, and the use of engaging activities and resources. Teaching assistants are well deployed to support low-achieving students.
- Students say that they enjoy their English lessons, particularly when given opportunities for discussion, role play and using media technology such as film clips. They like the extra challenges set out in their homework booklets. However, they sometimes find group work frustrating because they do not all work at the same rate.

The curriculum in English is good.

- The English curriculum has become broad and balanced. It covers all aspects of the subject and includes drama, wider reading supported by older students, research using the internet, and media such as film, television and advertising.
- The curriculum in Key Stage 3 has been reviewed and now more closely matches students' needs. Schemes of work contain activities which engage students, and especially boys, in learning. They include non-fiction such as travel writing, fiction, and the 'Grammar for Writing' schemes produced by Exeter University. To meet the learning needs of all students in the class, each scheme of work begins with a diagnostic test which shapes subsequent lesson planning, and ends with a test to measure the impact on students' learning and progress. As teachers use these strategies more confidently, students' achievement is improving.
- Transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 includes a record of each student's previous reading. This helps to identify students who would benefit from a reading mentor and underpins the greater breadth and confidence apparent in students' reading across the school.
- To narrow the gap for low-achieving students and those supported by the pupil premium, the English department provides a range of increasingly effective intervention programmes. For example, an English teacher with

specialist knowledge of phonics (the sounds that letters make) helps students in Year 7 to catch up with their reading. The special educational needs coordinator supports those with dyslexia. A few students receive additional literacy lessons in place of French lessons. Low-achieving students in Years 7 to 9 enjoy a weekly early morning reading session with their reading mentors from the year above. The school also ensures that students supported by the pupil premium take part in the extensive programme of additional activities. This network of support is helping students to develop the skills and confidence needed to catch up with their contemporaries.

- An exceptional variety of enrichment activities enhances the English curriculum. The activities include a film club, visiting theatre groups and participation in the Schools Shakespeare Festival which culminated in students putting on a production of 'Julius Caesar' at a local theatre. Students eagerly participate in activities such as drama productions, a weekly Debate Club, 'Room 101' persuasive speech competitions, the English Speaking Union and Youth Speaks. Last year, Key Stage 3 students reached the United Kingdom finals of 'Youth Speaks'. Students also participate in a Creative Writing Club, and house and local writing competitions, a Spelling Bee competition and a 'Kids' Lit Quiz' in the South West region. Reading is promoted by a range of visiting poets and authors. The school newsletters include articles on Year 7 students' favourite books and students have contributed to a Devon Anthology of Poetry.

Leadership and management of English are good.

- Self-evaluation by those with responsibility for English is accurate in identifying the most important areas for improvement and is leading to increasingly effective action, including professional development for staff.
- The head of English provides clear direction through the subject development plan which focuses appropriately on raising attainment by improving the quality of teaching and learning. Increasing strengths in teaching - reflected in the improved progress by, for example, more able students and in students' evident enjoyment of the subject – show that planning and monitoring are having a positive impact.
- The English team now works effectively together in planning schemes of work and sharing good practice, for example through observing each other's lessons.
- The head of English, ably supported by the second in department, monitors and evaluates students' progress systematically each half-term, through analysis of information about students' standards and progress, scrutiny of students' work, and frequent visits to lessons. These strategies are effective in identifying areas for improvement and in holding the teachers to account for their students' progress.
- As a result of interventions for low-achieving and more able students, the head of English has successfully addressed the 2012 decline in attainment

and has brought standards back up to being broadly in line with the national average.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising achievement for all students, including those supported by the pupil premium, and improving spelling and handwriting
- increasing the proportion of good and outstanding teaching by:
 - making sure that teachers constantly check and extend students' learning during lessons by adapting activities, the pace and their questions to the students' differing learning needs
 - ensuring that all students know how to improve their work through teachers' written comments in their books.

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

Sue Frater
Her Majesty's Inspector