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Ms Lavelle
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Dear Ms Lavelle

Ofsted Survey inspection programme – English and Science

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during the visit on 9-10 October 2006 by Susan Bowles HMI and myself to look at work in English and science.

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. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: discussions with staff and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of twelve lessons.

English

The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and Standards in English

- Achievement and standards in English are satisfactory. Attainment at the end of both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 is average in English, and better for girls than boys. In particular, the Key Stage 3 tests have shown a significant improvement from below average attainment. Early indications are that attainment at GCSE has improved in 2006, and that progress in English throughout the school is in line with expectations nationally.

- Pupils show fairly positive attitudes towards English. Behaviour is variable, and good when pupils are actively involved in learning. For example, one Year 7 class enthusiastically shared in the close reading of a piece of autobiography, giving reasons for their evaluations which were based on sharp-eyed appreciation for both stylistic features and context.

Quality of teaching and learning in English

The quality of teaching and learning in English is satisfactory.

- Teaching overall in English is satisfactory and shows some good features. Teachers form good relationships with pupils and make the purpose of activities clear to them. Some plan the sequence of steps of learning well, and make flexible and effective use of a range of teaching strategies. Good features seen in better lessons include: clear teaching of key concepts and skills; questions which probe and develop pupils' understanding; a balance of time spent on instruction with time to work independently or collaboratively to develop taught skills; and giving specific praise for behaviour which helps progress in English.
- Some teachers need to make more effective use of active strategies for learning, including managing whole class and small group discussion; and to make sure that all pupils in the class make progress.
- Assessment shows some good features. Pupils understand their progress towards broad targets, though some are less sure what they need to do to improve in specific areas such as speaking and listening or reading. Marking is at least satisfactory but varies in the extent to which it provides helpful feedback to pupils.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- The department provides a broad and balanced curriculum while at the same time preparing pupils well for national tests. The curriculum is kept under review with a view to improving standards. This has led to a reduction in pupils taking English Literature, but in time will enable more of them to take Media Studies. Good features include the use of interesting texts and an emphasis on strengthening reading skills.

Leadership and Management of English

Leadership and management in English are satisfactory overall.

- The subject self evaluation analyses performance data accurately though its overall judgements are not rigorous enough. In practice, the subject leaders have a sound grasp of the aspects of teaching and

learning which need to improve, reflected in a satisfactory action plan and improved outcomes.

- Teachers are provided with good resources including up to date schemes of work. Monitoring is regularly undertaken by school managers and subject leaders. However, feedback on the quality of teaching and marking needs to be more specific about expectations.

Provision for poetry

Provision for poetry is satisfactory.

- A strength of provision is the substantial opportunity to read, write and analyse poems in Key Stage 3. The poetry based work is progressively challenging and many pupils recall these tasks with satisfaction, especially when they have involved working with poets or writing for a wider audience.
- Poetry continues to be read in Key Stage 4, and occasionally written, for example in the form of lyrics. Higher and middle attaining pupils find the study of poems for their GCSE examinations interesting and rewarding, but sometimes others do not.

Inclusion in English

- The department successfully enters a high proportion of pupils for English at GCSE. All groups of pupils make satisfactory progress in English, but, overall, boys start and finish with weaker levels of attainment than girls.

Areas for improvement in English, which we discussed, included:

- more effective use of active strategies for learning, including management of whole class and small group discussion
- extending the effectiveness of the monitoring of teaching.

Science

The overall effectiveness of science was judged to be good.

Achievement and Standards in science

Standards in science are slightly below those found nationally.

- Standards in science are strong in comparison with most other subjects in the school. Pupils made good short term gains in many of the lessons seen, but overall, achievement is satisfactory.
- The progress made by high attaining pupils in different lessons ranged from satisfactory to excellent. Few pupils achieve A or A* grades at GCSE in science (and also in many other subjects).

- Attainment at the top end of the range is particularly weak for boys throughout the school. There is probably endemic underachievement amongst more able boys stretching back to before secondary schooling. Pupils are placed in sets for science by their scores on tests; generally only a third of pupils in top sets are boys. At present, the school gives only about ten boys each year access to top GCSE grades.

Quality of teaching and learning in science

The quality of teaching and learning in science is good.

- Of the seven lessons seen, six were at least good and two were excellent.
- In the main, teachers plan lessons that interest pupils and that motivate their best efforts. The pace of lessons and the level of challenge are usually appropriate, though there were instances of teaching moving too slowly and occasionally not stretching pupils as much as possible. A lesson for a top set in Year 11 stretched pupils to their limits. Meanwhile, work with a less able group focussed well on basic literacy skills and learning routines, but progress in relation to the science syllabus was limited.
- Lessons are not always planned so that pupils are moved on efficiently to the next steps that a syllabus or programme of study requires of pupils of their potential.
- Marking is mostly cursory, though there are instances of painstaking and helpful marking by certain teachers. Sometimes this is because the tasks set involve little more than a correct word or short response. There is limited guidance to pupils on how to sharpen their understanding of science because the work teachers give them to do gives little scope for revealing imperfections in knowledge and understanding.

Quality of the curriculum in science

The curriculum for science is broadly satisfactory.

- The range of courses for older pupils is appropriate. The school is embarking on GCSE Science for the Twenty First Century for many pupils. There is a need to ensure that the new areas to be covered are dealt with by rooting learning in strong understanding of science principles.
- Pupils should have better access to text books, and in particular those that treat topics with scientific rigour.
- Work in pupils' books shows some repetition, for example from Year 9 to Year 11, and some tasks set in lessons or for homework are undemanding. These features in the planning of the curriculum limit progress.

Leadership and management of science

Leadership and management of science are sound.

- Quality of provision is generally good, but variable across the department. Closer monitoring is needed to ensure consistency.
- Coursework could be managed more adroitly to maximise outcomes (for example, tighter deadlines for completion and allowance for more than the minimum number of opportunities). The department has good capacity for further improvement.

Provision for practical work

- Pupils say that they enjoy practical work but get little of it. There was no practical work in any of the seven lessons seen. In several lessons, learning could have been illuminated by practical demonstrations or, occasionally, class practical. There should be more emphasis on learning through practical activity (and less on 'electronic learning').

Inclusion in science

- For most pupils, achievement is satisfactory to good. More should be done to promote the achievement of more able boys. The school should review the policy whereby top sets contain few boys.

Areas for improvement in science, which we discussed, included:

- the promotion of better achievement for more able pupils and boys in particular
- ensuring that work moves on to appropriate next steps, with good pace and challenge and without repetition.
- making more of practical work and marking.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop your work in English and science in the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Jim Bennetts
Her Majesty's Inspector