

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404045
F 020 7421 6644
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr Robinson
Headteacher
Gosforth High School
Knightsbridge
Great North Road
Gosforth
Newcastle upon Tyne
Tyne and Wear
NE3 2JH

Dear Mr Robinson

Ofsted survey inspection programme – English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my joint visit with Joy Frost AI on 19 and 20 September 2006 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. 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: interviews with staff and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and Standards

Achievement and standards in English are good.

- Attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 and 4 and in the sixth form is well above average. Results compare well with other subjects.
- Standards in English have risen in recent years and are good overall, but the rate of progress in Key Stage 4 has dipped recently. It was in line with expectations nationally in 2005.
- Lessons observed confirmed that students' progress is good. Their attitudes to English are very positive; their behaviour, interest and concentration on independent work are good.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in English is good.

- Teaching in English is usually good and sometimes outstanding. Teachers form good relationships with students and use a wide range of active strategies. Students learn to express their ideas well as a result of the skilful management of speaking and listening and explicit teaching about language. Students are encouraged to work both independently and cooperatively and are involved in their assessment.
- Occasionally teachers do not plan their lessons carefully to ensure that students move from their different starting points towards clearly defined learning outcomes. Expectations are sometimes too low and some lessons give too little space for students to explore their ideas.
- Students understand their strengths and weaknesses, but are not always clear about what they have to do next to improve. Marking is at least satisfactory but varies in the extent to which it provides helpful feedback to students about their targets.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The department provides a broad and balanced English curriculum while preparing students thoroughly for national tests and examinations.
- A particular strength is the variety of English, drama and media courses available.
- There is a clear focus on teaching literature, and improved provision to encourage wider reading.
- Students have good opportunities to develop their speaking and listening and functional language skills. Teachers provide well for drama and media in English, and make imaginative use of ICT.

Leadership and Management of English

Leadership and management in English are satisfactory.

- The acting head of department is focussed on raising standards and sets high expectations. Teachers strive to dismantle barriers to learning. The department works well together and shares a common sense of purpose.
- The acting head of department and experienced colleagues model many features of good practice in their teaching and the guidance and resources they share.

- However, subject self evaluation and planning is not fully effective. The department lacks a clear view of its strengths and weaknesses. Planning for progression is limited.
- The department lacks an effective system for tracking students' progress, and strategies to improve achievement have not been systematically evaluated.

Poetry

Provision for poetry is satisfactory.

- Poetry is represented appropriately in the scheme of work for Year 9, which includes a good sequence of lessons on poetry. This offers students lively approaches to a variety of challenging and enjoyable poems and opportunities to write their own.
- The study of poetry in Key Stage 4 is constrained by examination pressures. However, one class has presented original poetic writing with a personal commentary for the GCSE examination.
- Students' attitudes to poetry vary over time. They are positive in Key Stage 3, but lukewarm in Key Stage 4. In the sixth form, poetry is regarded as difficult but interesting.

Inclusion

Inclusion in English is good.

- The department successfully enters a high proportion of students for both English and English Literature at GCSE. Students entering the sixth form from other schools feel welcomed in English lessons, and students with relatively modest attainment at GCSE make good progress in the sixth form.
- Good strategies are used to involve all students in speaking and listening activities and to support less confident writers. Teachers vary the composition of groups with care and most students agree this contributes to their progress.
- The gender gap in English is similar to the national picture, though it has been smaller in the past.
- Occasionally teachers do not differentiate tasks or resources sufficiently for students with EAL.
- Currently the school's systems for tracking progress do not allow evaluation of the attainment of different groups.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- to improve tracking of pupils' progress and ensure that teaching moves all pupils towards their targets

- to develop a subject action plan and effective systems to identify and spread outstanding practice.

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

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority/Local Learning Skills Council. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term and made available to the team for the next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Susan Bowles
Her Majesty's Inspector