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Mr Kenworthy
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Dear Mr Kenworthy

Ofsted survey inspection programme - English and Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Barbara Wintersgill on 07-08 November 2006 to look at work in English and Religious Education (RE).

As outlined in our initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subjects the visit had a particular focus on our current survey themes: provision for poetry and the implementation of the agreed syllabus.

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.

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.

English

The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards in English are good.

Over the last four years there has been an overall rising trend in standards at Key Stage 3 to bring them close to the national average. In 2006 the percentage of pupils reaching level 5 exceeded the target

set for the school. PANDA data suggests that achievement at KS3 is average. In lessons observed pupils made good progress.

In 2005 the percentage of pupils achieving grades A*-C at GCSE was below average. In 2006 there was a small decline in the number of pupils at this level. There was a similar decline in the school as a whole. In 2005 girls performed better than boys but the disparity was smaller than that seen nationally.

PANDA data for 2005 suggests that the achievement of pupils in English from Key Stages 2-4 was significantly higher than average. In lessons observed, pupils made good progress across the ability range. In 2005 and 2006 all pupils passed their English examinations in the sixth form. Students make generally good progress from a range of starting points.

Personal development is good. Pupils enjoy their English lessons, generally behave well and develop effective communication skills.

They frequently show a sensitive and reflective response to their work.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

Teaching and learning is good overall with some significant strengths.

The quality of teaching is consistently good and there is strong uniformity of practice. Lessons are well planned with clear learning objectives and a focus on progression. In a department which is strongly committed to mixed ability teaching, there is good provision to make the lessons equally accessible to all pupils and good support is provided across the ability range. The teaching assistants make a valuable contribution to this.

There is a good range of learning activities which helps pupils to maintain high levels of enthusiasm and concentration. Teachers make good use of questioning and discussion to challenge and involve pupils. In a small number of lessons, teachers did not always deal quickly enough with low level disruption or slow starts to lessons.

The quality of assessment, including marking, is good. Teachers are able to identify which pupils are in need of additional support or challenge. Pupils show high awareness of their own progress and show mature understanding of what they need to do to improve.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is good.

It is broad and balanced throughout the school. In Key Stage 4 and the sixth form the range of subjects on offer has been extended to

meet the identified needs of all students. For example, the low performance of some pupils in English Literature at GCSE and "A" level led to the introduction of Media Studies courses to better meet students' more practical and technological interests. In Key Stage 3 there is provision for drama, media work and ICT in English. There is a good range of additional courses to address pupils' weak reading skills in Years 7 and 8.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are good.

Recently introduced strategies for raising standards are proving effective such as the additional classes for higher attaining Key Stage 3 pupils. There are also well managed arrangements for pupils who need additional support. The school has recently introduced strategies to identify more accurately the pupils in Key Stage 4 who are unlikely to attain a grade C at GCSE without additional support and monitoring. The monitoring of teaching and learning is efficiently organised and has been successful in identifying areas for action. There is willingness to be flexible when this is seen to be necessary, for example in temporarily disbanding mixed ability teaching of Year 11 poetry.

Provision for poetry

Provision for poetry is good.

Pupils and teachers enjoy poetry and discuss it with enthusiasm and confidence. Sixth form students are less enthusiastic and none read poetry for pleasure. Poetry is taught regularly and well. In one lesson observed a Year 8 boy spontaneously wrote a piece of well-crafted verse as an answer to a teacher's question. There is very good use of a wide range of poetry in other curriculum areas such as dance and food technology. The appointment of a pupil Poet Laureate has given poetry a higher status in the school and provides a memorable way of marking significant events.

Inclusion

All teaching groups are mixed ability and differentiation is good. Pupils achieve well.

The disparity in attainment between boys and girls at GCSE is narrower than average.

Good support is given to pupils who are likely to underachieve.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

increase the numbers of pupils attaining at least a grade C at GCSE.

Religious Education

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be good.

Achievement and Standards

Pupils' achievement in RE is good.

- Standards in examinations at GCSE and GCE are broadly in line with the national average and represent good achievement by the pupils.
- Most pupils make good progress, more so in Key Stage 4 than Key Stage 3. Girls make better progress than boys. The more able need more challenging work if they are to reach the higher levels.
- Pupils have very positive attitudes to RE responding to the teaching methods used. The subject contributes well to their personal development.

Quality of teaching and learning of RE

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good with some outstanding features.

- Teachers, including most of those who originally trained in a different specialism, have good subject knowledge.
- Lessons are generally lively and challenging. The pace and variety of learning activities are outstanding features that lead to high levels of pupil involvement in lessons.
- The level of challenge in lessons stretches all but the most able and where difficult concepts are covered, activities are carefully structured so that pupils make good progress. The excellent humanities-based teaching assistants make an important contribution in supporting pupils who would otherwise struggle.
- It is a strength of the department that teachers produce their own resources designed to encourage the skills of independent and collaborative learning.
- Many learning activities are carefully constructed to enable all pupils to achieve their potential but on occasions the higher ability pupils would benefit from more demanding work.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The curriculum at Key Stage 3 follows the new agreed syllabus provided by Cornwall LA but would benefit from cross reference to the syllabus to ensure that all topics are included and that all strands of the attainment targets are addressed.
- A strength is the provision of the GCSE short course for all pupils. The focus on social and ethical issues makes a very positive contribution to pupils' learning and their wider personal development.
- Planning makes the curriculum relevant and interesting for pupils and this is achieved by the seamless integration of the two attainment targets, so that neither 'learning about religions' or personal reflection dominates any lesson.
- The quality of assessment is satisfactory but is developing. Assessment in lessons is generally good. However there are no systems for monitoring and recording achievement against the strands of the attainment targets and there is not enough attention to meeting the demands of Level 5 and beyond.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management of the subject are good.

- The department has made good progress in producing a self-evaluation. The sections on standards and leadership are particularly evaluative and high quality.
- The department improvement plan is rigorously focused on key areas for development identified through self-evaluation.
- After a period of disruption in staffing, the head of department is rejuvenating the department by focusing strongly on raising standards and promoting the personal development of pupils. This has created a common sense of purpose among staff.
- There is a good team spirit in the department, which is evident in the strong collaboration between staff and the sharing of effective practice. This is resulting in high levels of consistency in the quality of teaching.

Implementation of the Agreed Syllabus

- Teachers have a clear understanding of the main changes in the new syllabus as a result of the head of department's participation in the local authority's dissemination programme.
- The head of department has a clear understanding of the ways the new syllabus will help improve the current provision for RE in the school.

- Plans in operation to implement the agreed syllabus are comprehensive recognising its main priorities. The process of implementation has been incorporated within the department's improvement plan.

Inclusion

- The inclusion of all pupils is a particular strength. The department successfully enters all pupils for a GCSE course. Pupils with learning difficulties are given good support. The department has still to develop strategies for developing the potential of more able pupils.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- to monitor and record pupils' attainment in relation to all the strands in both attainment targets
- to improve provision for high ability pupils by setting work that will enable them to demonstrate attainment at the higher levels.

We hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop English and RE in the school. As we explained in our previous letters, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority, and in the case of RE, SACRE. 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

Patricia Walker
Additional Inspectors