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Dear Mr Kerr

Ofsted survey inspection programme - English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 12-13 December 2006 to look at work in English.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject the visit had a particular focus on our current survey theme: provision for poetry. 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 six lessons or parts of lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards in English are satisfactory.

- Standards in English at Key Stage 3 have been consistently above average over time, rose further in 2005 and stayed at a similar level in 2006. However, the achievement of the pupils has declined in recent years and is satisfactory overall.
- Standards at Key Stage 4 are also consistently above average, rose in 2005 and stayed at a similar level in 2006. The pupils' achievement has been inconsistent over the years but is good overall.
- The attainment of the pupils in the sixth form in Advanced Level English Literature is average and their achievement is satisfactory.

- Lesson observations and scrutiny of pupils' work confirmed that their achievement in English is good in Years 10 and 11 and satisfactory overall.

Quality of teaching and learning in English

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory.

- In the best practice, teachers use their good subject knowledge well. At Key Stage 4 in particular, assessment criteria are made clear and standards usefully exemplified by discussing the pupils' own work in class. Teachers model essential skills well for the pupils. Good questioning techniques challenge the pupils appropriately and help them to improve their understanding and skills. These lessons are purposeful, well paced and motivating.
- Students respond well to the subject and their behaviour and attitudes are good. The department makes a good contribution to the pupils' personal development and well-being.
- In the less successful teaching, teachers' subject knowledge is sometimes insecure. Lesson planning does not sufficiently link the tasks in the lessons and their purpose is unclear. The teaching sometimes dominates the lessons so that pupils are passive recipients of the teacher's knowledge rather than active participants in their own learning.
- The quality of assessment in English is better in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form than at Key Stage 3. Marking for the older pupils clearly tells them what they have achieved and how to improve their work. For the younger pupils, marking tends to comment on attitudes and effort rather than on the quality of the English. Some pupils reported that they found the praise they received pleasing but unhelpful and they do not always know how to improve their work. Although a range of assessment data is available in English, it is not always fully exploited in identifying strengths and weaknesses precisely and planning for improvement accordingly.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- Schemes of work throughout the school ensure a degree of consistency in the pupils' experience.
- The schemes of work at Key Stage 3 show a sound level of coverage for reading and writing. There are opportunities for studying the media and using ICT. However, the schemes do not clearly show which skills are being addressed or how progression in them is secured.

- Drama is not integrated into the schemes of work. It has been offered in the past as a GCSE subject but is now taught only in Year 11. It is not intended as a future option because of declining numbers.
- Media studies is an option offered by the department at Key Stage 4 and is taught at Advanced Level.
- The school runs Advanced Level courses in English Literature but not in English Language.
- The pupils speak enthusiastically about their reading and their use of the school library, but the school rightly thinks that it needs upgrading.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management in English are satisfactory.

- The head of department has established a sound curriculum which assures some essential common elements in the provision for the pupils.
- The careful targeting of resources on Years 10 and 11 results in good achievement in those year groups.
- The responsibility for the leadership and management of English rests squarely on the head of department. Other staff are not sufficiently involved in developing policy and improving provision.
- There is an inconsistent approach to some aspects of the department's work, such as the use of assessment and the teaching of drama and poetry at Key Stage 3. The monitoring and evaluation of the department's work does not always pick up these issues and action to address them is not always sufficiently swift or effective.
- Insufficient knowledge of the implications of school and national data does not help the department to assess the precise quality and impact of its work.

Provision for poetry

Provision for poetry is satisfactory.

- Provision is satisfactory overall and meets requirements for examination at GCSE and Advanced Level. However, at Key Stage 3 the schemes of work do not adequately cover the requirements of the National Curriculum. Because the teaching of poetry is left largely to the discretion of individual teachers, provision is patchy and limited in the coverage of genre, period and style.
- Pupils at Key Stage 3 speak enthusiastically about writing their own poetry, but those in other year groups report that they do not get this opportunity.

- Pupils in Key Stage 4 generally enjoy the poetry course and can speak about it with some knowledge and understanding.
- Sixth form students said that they had enjoyed the limited range of poetry that they had studied in class. They had little knowledge of the range of poetry in English and said that they had more knowledge of prose and of the skills required to read and appreciate it.

Inclusion

Inclusion in English is good.

- All groups of pupils make at least satisfactory progress throughout the school. Progress is good at Key Stage 4.
- Pupils all have access to a good range of examinations in English, including media studies.
- The school and department provide good support for pupils in English, particularly those pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving the quality of teaching and learning and its consistency across the year groups
- improving the quality and use of assessment in English
- ensuring that leadership and management at all levels are more rigorous and consistent in monitoring and evaluating the impact of provision.

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

Andrew Harrett
Her Majesty's Inspector