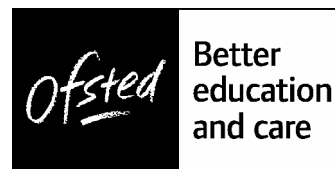


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01 February 2007

Mrs Craig
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Dear Mrs Craig

Ofsted survey inspection programme – English and mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Jan Bennett HMI on 23-24 January 2007 to inspect work in English and mathematics.

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 in both subjects.

English

The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards in English are outstanding.

- Standards in English at the end of Key Stage 4 are well above average.
- Standards have risen significantly over the past three years in both key stages.
- Achievement in English is very good overall although pupils make more progress in Key Stage 4. The 2006 GCSE results confirm high rates of progress by large numbers of pupils. Achievement at the end of Key Stage 3 improved greatly in 2006.
- Evidence from the early November entries in English suggests that the current Year 11 results will be even better in 2007.

- The achievement of boys in English at GCSE is especially impressive. Many of them make better progress than girls and there is no evidence of the kind of gap in performance between boys and girls in English that occurs in most schools.
- Able pupils also achieve very well in English. Evidence from the inspection confirms that the department is right to focus on further improvements in achievement by some of the less able pupils and on developments in provision for reading.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning in English is good.

- Good teaching makes a positive contribution to the very good rates of progress made by many pupils, alongside particular strengths in the curriculum and departmental leadership.
- Many pupils are very positive about their English lessons. They praise the fact that teachers “make learning fun,” that they are fully involved in discussions and that teachers form good relationships with them.
- Teaching observed during the inspection was good overall. The best teaching in the department is of very high quality. It is marked by clear learning objectives and planned outcomes, the use of a wide range of strategies that involve pupils in their learning, and very good subject knowledge. In these lessons, teachers develop pupils’ speaking and listening skills well through very effective management of class discussions. In some of the lessons observed, featuring low ability sets, teachers did not always manage classroom discussion well when faced with boisterous pupil behaviour.
- There are particular strengths to the department’s assessment practice. Assessment is well integrated into the scheme of work at Key Stage 3 and covers all aspects of the subject, including speaking and listening. Pupils review their own progress well and the department makes good use of individual profiles of work to help track achievement.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding.

- There are particular strengths to the curriculum provided by the school in English at Key Stage 4. A good range of courses is available including English Literature, media studies and drama. The programme also succeeds in promoting learning; all pupils last year achieved a GCSE grade in English.
- The department has created a flexible curriculum at Key Stage 4 which seeks to match the needs of different groups of pupils. For example, able pupils take GCSE English Literature at the end of Year 10 so that they can pursue English Language at GCSE and AS level in Year 11.

Other pupils are also entered early for English exams in order to provide challenge and avoid problems that might arise from poor attendance in Year 11. This flexibility extends to Year 9 which is treated by the department as a preparation for the GCSE course.

- The department has done a huge amount of work in producing detailed schemes of work for both key stages. These provide lesson-by-lesson plans which have proved especially helpful for new members of the department.
- The Key Stage 3 scheme in particular is under constant review as the department seeks to continue to improve provision for pupils. At present, the programme does not focus sufficiently on the promotion of pupils' wider reading after Year 7.
- There are examples of very good enrichment activities including after-school support for pupils, drama and writing clubs, and trips related to the curriculum, such as the visit to Belgium in connection with the Year 9 work on war poets.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management in English are outstanding.

- Standards are continuing to rise, some of the teaching is outstanding and pupils are very positive about the subject. This reflects very good leadership.
- The head of department provides excellent leadership. He has a very clear view about English in the school and sets high standards. He is a very good classroom practitioner, focused on providing high quality teaching throughout the department.
- The department is very self-critical and reflective; it uses a wide range of evidence to evaluate performance. The curriculum is constantly under review. A particularly innovative feature is the development of the "pupil voice" through feedback from pupils by a programme of structured lesson observations.
- Delegation is good and other members of the team have contributed well to departmental improvement.

Provision for poetry

Provision for poetry is satisfactory.

- Pupils mostly enjoy the poetry that is taught in the GCSE course. Able pupils in particular, including boys, respond positively to the analytical approach and opportunities to give their views. The impact of effective teaching of poetry is seen in the very good GCSE results.
- Pupils' attitudes to poetry overall are more mixed. This may have been a contributory factor to the decision by so many pupils to opt for media studies GCSE rather than English Literature in 2006.

- Units on poetry are taught in Year 7 and Year 9. The first unit gives pupils opportunities to read and write a range of poems; the Year 9 unit provides a good introduction to GCSE and has been well received by pupils.
- The current scheme means that poetry is not taught systematically in Year 8. There is also no evidence of planned progression in teaching and learning of poetry across Key Stage 3.
- Pupils have few opportunities to write their own poems in Key Stage 4.

Inclusion

Inclusion in English is outstanding.

- This judgement reflects the very good achievement of pupils overall.
- All pupils obtained at least one qualification in English last year and the department's entry policy is inclusive and responsive to pupils' needs.
- The achievement of boys is very good and much better than the national picture.
- The school operates a daily literacy clinic which enables staff and older pupils to provide good, individualised support for targeted pupils.
- The department goes out of its way to evaluate pupils' response to English and listens carefully to the views of all pupils.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- reviewing the place of poetry and wider, independent reading in the Key Stage 3 scheme of work
- improving the management of class discussions in some lower set English groups.

Mathematics

The overall effectiveness of mathematics was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory.

- Pupils enter the school with attainment that is slightly above average. In Key Stage 3, they make satisfactory progress although boys generally achieve better than girls.
- GCSE pass rates have recovered following a dip last year. All pupils attained a grade A* to G in 2006, a notable achievement, and the proportion of pupils achieving grades A* to C has increased. Overall, pupils make satisfactory progress in Key Stage 4 although the girls outperformed the boys in 2006. Pupils with learning difficulties underachieved in 2005.

- Behaviour in lessons is variable. In some lessons, pupils behave well and work hard but in the less effective lessons pupils work slowly and are easily distracted. A significant number of pupils are passive in lessons. They do not misbehave but they show little interest in their work and they do not play an active part in the lesson.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge and generally explain techniques clearly. In the better lessons, teachers use effective questioning skills to challenge pupils' thinking and develop their understanding. Some lower-ability groups benefit from lively teaching and learning; their teachers have good behaviour management skills.
- Although teachers share the learning objectives with pupils at the start of the lesson, most lesson plans are brief and pay insufficient attention to catering for the full range of ability within the group. The range of resources used in some lessons is poor and is hampering learning and understanding. Most lessons are traditional in style, being dominated by the teacher with pupils copying examples from the board and completing exercises.
- Systems are in place for setting targets and monitoring and reviewing pupils' progress. Pupils' work is marked regularly by their teachers but uses mainly ticks and crosses with some correction of errors. Praise and encouragement is given but there are few helpful comments about how the work could be improved.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is satisfactory.

- There are schemes of work for each ability band but they are not yet providing guidance on teaching approaches and resources. Plans are underway to provide more detailed information. Recent building work has restricted pupils' access to computers and information learning technology is not widely used to aid learning, although the use of interactive whiteboards is increasing.
- Intervention strategies, booster classes and homework clubs are provided and pupils can access revision software via the internet which they find useful.
- Gifted and talented pupils benefit from the opportunity to take an additional course in GCSE statistics and a few are able to study GCE AS modules at the local sixth-form college. The school works in partnership with three others in the area to stage 'maths challenge' events and pupils take part in regional and national competitions. As part of its specialist status as a mathematics and computing college,

the department also works with gifted and talented Year 6 pupils from its partner primary schools.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are satisfactory.

- The department has been through a period of rapid change and severe staffing shortages. The head of department has been in post for just over a year and has introduced a number of monitoring and support systems. The new team are working together well. A range of centralised learning resources has been established but they are not being fully utilised.
- The department's self evaluation is insufficiently critical of the effectiveness of the provision. While the head of department has correctly identified areas of underachievement, the underlying causes have not been investigated. Teaching and learning are satisfactory rather than good; this is reflected in the progress that pupils are making. The management systems that are in place are not yet sufficiently robust to have full impact upon raising achievement.
- The school met some of its mathematics targets that relate to its specialist mathematics and computing status. While the senior manager's reports state what actions have been taken, their impact has not been adequately evaluated.

Pupils' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

- Pupils' enjoyment and understanding varies with the teacher. Most lessons are focused on acquiring knowledge and skills rather than developing understanding. Pupils are able to complete exercises successfully without understanding what they are doing.
- Statistical surveys and investigative work are included in schemes of work. Pupils appreciate the opportunity to work in groups and to discuss their ideas. They enjoy being involved in lessons and learning from their friends as well as the teacher.
- Pupils appreciate interesting 'starter activities' and games but not all teachers include them very often. Too many lessons are dull and follow the same predictable lesson format.

Inclusion

Inclusion in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Lessons do not always meet the differing needs of all pupils but extension work is available for those who successfully complete the work that has been set.

- Pupils who are underachieving and need extra support to improve their performance are identified and given additional help. Learning support tutors are deployed well in most lessons and work closely with the teacher to meet the needs of pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- tackling the pockets of underachievement by analysing and addressing the causes
- raising the quality of teaching and learning so that pupils understand and enjoy mathematics
- increasing the rigour of improvement planning and implementation by ensuring self-evaluation is accurate and monitoring systems are robust.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop English and mathematics 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

Philip Jarrett
Her Majesty's Inspector