

09 March 2007

Ms J Potts
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Dear Ms Potts

Ofsted survey inspection programme – English and Religious
Education

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Chris Nye on 28 February and 1 March 2007 to look at work in English and religious education (RE).

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.

English

The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and Standards

Achievement and standards in English are good.

- Pupils enter the school with above average standards in English and this is maintained and developed throughout Key Stage 3 and 4. Pupils achieve well above local and national averages by the end of Key Stage 3 and above average at the end of Key Stage 4. At Post 16,

the A level pass rate is very high, although fewer achieve the higher grades.

- The school has accurately identified that middle ability boys achieve less well, relative to their prior attainment, and has put in place suitable strategies to address this. Pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities make very good progress.
- Standards in reading, writing, speaking and listening are good.

Quality of teaching and learning

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

- Teaching is effective because teachers have excellent subject knowledge and a passion for their subject. As a result, pupils are very enthusiastic in English lessons and are keen to do well.
- Lessons are well planned to ensure good progression and a brisk pace of learning. Many of the activities are very imaginative and teachers use questioning techniques effectively to support the learning and encourage a deeper understanding of the subject. Learning is also well supported by teaching assistants who are skilled at identifying where support is needed without the need for teacher direction.
- The use of talk partners is under-planned so that their purpose is not always sufficiently clear and the impact of this strategy varies as a result.
- Assessment systems are well established and are used effectively to set targets and inform planning. Marking is satisfactory overall, and at best is evaluative and helpful. On occasions, however, it is insufficiently detailed and opportunities are missed to provide guidance on how the work of more able pupils can be developed.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in English is outstanding.

- The curriculum is very well planned throughout. The departmental handbook provides well designed guidance materials which effectively support the teaching. It also allows for sufficient flexibility of planning so that the needs of individual cohorts can be met within the overall curriculum plan.
- There is a good balance between language and literature, and the use of a wide range of relevant texts helps to ensure high levels of pupil motivation.
- Curriculum enrichment activities are outstanding. Pupils have a wide range of opportunities to develop a passion for poetry, drama and literature through such activities as theatre trips, writers in residence and the very impressive 'Bookies' Club.

- The library is well organised and stocked. It makes a significant contribution to the development of the provision for English.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management of English are good.

- The English department is well led and organised by the head of department. The team works very well together within a structure that delegates responsibilities effectively. There is a clear sense of common purpose and very good documentation supports effective organisation and management.
- Effective monitoring and data analysis systems are in place which means that the department has a clear idea of the strengths and weaknesses in English. A development plan identifies suitable priorities and strategies to address the weaknesses but the success criteria are not all clearly measurable.

Provision for poetry

The provision for poetry is outstanding.

- Poetry is very well planned and features prominently throughout the English curriculum. The units are well designed to inspire pupils and include both poetry writing and the study of a wide range of poets and poems.
- Teachers demonstrate a passion for poetry and many use their own poetry to enhance their teaching and model poetry writing. As a result pupils are well motivated to read, write and study poetry. They are developing a good range of poetry skills, although some over-use rhyme in their poems.
- The value that the school places on poetry is well demonstrated by the good range of opportunities afforded to pupils to publish their work, including the well presented annual school anthology

Inclusion

Inclusion in English is very good.

- The English department is clearly committed to ensuring that all pupils have equal access to the English curriculum. Great efforts are made to ensure that there is a range of text to engage the interests of all groups of learners. Robust data analysis and monitoring ensures that the needs of particular groups are identified early and that suitable strategies are put in place to address these needs.
- Underachieving pupils are well supported through booster sessions and a well-trained team of teaching assistants. Higher achieving pupils are

well supported by smaller streamed groups and outstanding curriculum enrichment activities.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that talk partners are used more effectively
- improving consistency in marking, particularly in providing guidance to more able pupils about how they can improve their work still further
- developing measurable success criteria in the English development plan to monitor more closely the impact of improvement strategies.

Religious education

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and Standards

Pupils' achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- Full and short course GCSE results are just above national averages and reflect good progress by the pupils. Pupils develop a sound knowledge and understanding of the religions and topics they have studied. They also develop good use of technical vocabulary.
- At Key Stage 3 pupils' achievement is satisfactory. The development of some of the more demanding skills of the subject, such as the ability to explain how different beliefs lead to major differences between religions, is limited. There is some under-achievement at Key Stage 3 amongst higher ability pupils.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is satisfactory overall.

- In the lessons observed, teaching quality varied between satisfactory and outstanding. Overall in lessons pupils make at least the progress that should be expected of them.
- Pupils' attitudes to RE are generally good and they particularly enjoy the more imaginative tasks and discussion. Teachers have good subject knowledge and are confident practitioners. In some lessons pupils are appropriately challenged but sometimes teaching limits the opportunities for pupils to engage in independent or collaborative learning.
- Although pupils can respond at higher levels orally, their written work including assessment tasks at Key Stage 3 often focus around low level descriptive work. Assessment does not give an accurate picture of standards or progress. The abbreviated level descriptions in use do not

reflect the 'real' levels in the agreed syllabus and consequently a lot of work is not accurately tailored to pupils' different capabilities.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The Key Stage 4 curriculum provides opportunities for most pupils to gain a GCSE qualification.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is planned with attention to detail and is largely based on schemes of work produced by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority some years ago. These schemes of work are not always consistent with the new Dorset Agreed Syllabus.
- The curriculum gives good attention to literacy skills and the use of ICT to support teaching and learning.

Leadership and Management

Leadership and management in RE are satisfactory overall.

- The school benefits from three experienced RE specialists. Some features of management are effective, notably the support given to non-specialists. The management of assessment has a number of strengths; there are good procedures for analysing data.
- Quality assurance follows the school procedures but does not get to the heart of key issues that currently prevent the department from realising its potential; for example, assessed tasks should be used more effectively as a basis of work sampling and moderation against the level descriptions.

Implementation of the Agreed Syllabus

The department has tried to amend its work to take account of the changes in the new agreed syllabus but has not incorporated the new programme of study for Key Stage 3. Some weaker aspects of pupils' learning are caused in part by the lack of precision in the recommended abbreviated version of the level descriptions in the Dorset Agreed Syllabus.

Inclusion

Most groups of pupils make satisfactory progress in RE. There is some underperformance, particularly among high ability pupils.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- bringing the quality of teaching up to the standard of the best by focusing more on pupils' learning and making class organisation more varied and fit for purpose
- developing higher order RE skills by setting work that is more challenging
- reviewing the curriculum to bring it into line with the Dorset agreed syllabus, taking care to build in progression through an increase of difficulty over the key stage
- re-writing assessment tasks and marking criteria in line with the levels in the Agreed Syllabus and moderating assessments for accuracy
- devising strategies for recording attainment demonstrated through oral and group work.

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

Yours sincerely

Barbara Wintersgill
Additional Inspector