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Mr R Burman
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Burman

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Evaluation of the Primary and Secondary National Strategies

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 12–13 November 2007 to look at work in the Secondary National Strategy (SNS).

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the SNS, the visit had a particular focus on the impact of assessment for learning (AfL) and quality of programmes for disengaged/disaffected students.

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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of six part lessons.

The overall effectiveness of the SNS was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Students' achievement in English is satisfactory and improving, as is the impact of AfL on students' achievement and personal development.

- In 2007, results at Key Stage 3 improved and standards are now above the national average. Students made good progress from their starting points.

- At Key Stage 4, results also improved and are in line with the national average. Students made satisfactory progress overall, although boys performed substantially less well than girls.
- In the lessons observed, students made satisfactory progress. Their attitudes and concentration were good.
- AfL has contributed to improved achievement through clear use of learning objectives, well structured lessons, increased use of assessment criteria with students, and teachers' focused written feedback on students' work.

Quality of teaching and learning in English

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory with good features. The impact of AfL on teaching and learning in English is satisfactory and improving.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge and plan lessons thoroughly with clear learning objectives.
- Teachers use a good range of activities to engage students, including regular paired work and effective use of assessment criteria linked to learning objectives.
- Although the objectives in teachers' plans are often differentiated to match the varying capabilities of students, this is not followed up sufficiently through a range of different resources and activities pitched at the right level to allow students to achieve.
- Teachers' use of questioning techniques varies in quality with the best encouraging extended responses from a wide range of students but some requiring only short responses from volunteers.
- Teachers' marking is thorough and their comments relate to the objectives set for the work. Students are provided with targets to improve their work but these are not always followed up by the teacher in subsequent pieces of work.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in English is good. The impact of AfL on the curriculum is satisfactory.

- Schemes of work are broad and well planned, with generally appropriate guidance for teachers.
- The curriculum is flexible, with most students now taking their GCSE in English in November of Year 11 and then concentrating on English Literature while a few take courses at entry level.
- Through the focus on AfL, students now have access to simplified assessment criteria which help them to know the level at which they are working and what they need to do to improve.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management in English are satisfactory and improving. The effectiveness of the leadership and management of AfL across the school is good.

- The senior team use SNS and AfL initiatives effectively to shape school policy on teaching, learning and assessment. There are very clear expectations set for teachers and school policies are well-focused. School-led training and development work involve a good range of staff, through working groups and action research.
- Monitoring and evaluation by the senior team and the English department are accurate and reflect appropriately the areas of AfL which are established and those where further work is required.
- In English, setting learning objectives, using assessment criteria and providing informative written feedback have contributed to improved results at both Key Stages. However, the quality of teachers' planning for students of differing ability, use of questioning techniques and consolidation of learning in plenary sessions is variable.

Assessment for learning

The impact of AfL overall is satisfactory with some good features.

- Clear learning objectives, well-structured lessons and helpful feedback through oral and written comments are used effectively.
- Other aspects of AfL, as listed in the last sentence of the preceding paragraph, are yet to be embedded in lessons consistently.

The quality of programmes for disaffected students

The quality of programmes for disaffected or disengaged students is good.

- Students are identified promptly using a range of information.
- Intervention is increasingly undertaken at an early stage.
- Programmes are flexible and suited to the particular needs of individual students, including a wide range of internal and external courses and qualifications.
- The recently established provision for students working well below the level necessary to access the secondary curriculum is effective.
- Intervention programmes from the SNS are not widely used.
- Students speak warmly about the quality of the work done to help them achieve. School data on achievement and behaviour indicates clear improvements for these students.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving the proportion of boys with Level 5 in English at Key Stage 3 who go on to attain a grade C or better at GCSE
- ensuring that teachers plan a range of tasks and activities at different levels, with suitable resources, to enable students of differing abilities to achieve the appropriate learning objectives
- improving the range and quality of teachers' questioning techniques
- reviewing the ways in which students' progress against the targets set for them to improve their work might be tracked.

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

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

Yours sincerely

Martin Cragg
Her Majesty's Inspector