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Dear Mrs Vincent

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 16 - 17 October 2007 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: independent learning in English. 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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of seven lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Standards are very high. Students' achievement has been satisfactory over recent years but is currently good.

- Attainment is well above average at all key stages, including within the sixth form.
- Past test and exam results suggest that pupils' progress has been satisfactory overall, with better achievement at Key Stage 3 than Key Stage 4. However, the un-validated 2007 results confirm better current progress by pupils, especially the most able.
- Students make better than expected progress in Advanced level English.
- Progress in lessons observed during the inspection was good.

- English makes a significant contribution to pupils' personal and social development. Good opportunities for discussion in lessons help most girls to become articulate, and to develop self-confidence and good collaborative skills.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Pupils are very positive about learning in English, praising lessons for their variety, good support from teachers and opportunities to express their own views.
- Lessons observed featured good teaching. Teachers formed strong relationships with pupils and managed classes well. Teachers' good knowledge and enthusiasm helped to engage pupils and lessons were mostly varied and lively.
- Pupils are highly motivated. They are keen to do well, they show perseverance and respond positively to challenges.
- In some lessons observed, opportunities were missed to review pupils' learning and planning did not directly identify the needs of the different groups of learners in the mixed ability classes.
- There are some strengths in the department's practice on assessment. Pupils are encouraged to review their own progress in lessons and learning aims are clearly identified. Pupils are aware of their levels of attainment and understand the assessment criteria.
- Curricular targets are set both through some teachers' marking and at specific assessment points. However, many pupils are not able to explain how to improve their work and the department needs to make feedback more consistent and more effective in helping pupils understand how to improve their work.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is outstanding.

- Pupils are offered a very good choice of courses at both GCSE and Advanced level, covering English, English literature, drama and media studies. There are also some entry level courses for a very small number of the less academic girls.
- Nearly all pupils are entered for GCSE in both English and English literature and standards are high in both.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is well balanced and varied, making use of a wide range of units which engage pupils' interest. It is enhanced by regular drama and independent reading lessons, as well as a Year 7 transition unit, public speaking competitions and opportunities to contribute to the school's themed days.
- A good programme of intervention initiatives supports the work of some of the lower attaining pupils.

- Many pupils make good use of ICT to enhance their work, especially through independent research and homework.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management of English are good.

- There has been some turbulence in departmental leadership over recent years. Current developments suggest that the capacity for improvement is now good.
- The departmental and whole school self-evaluation of English was honest, open and accurate. The head of department has a good understanding of strengths and weaknesses in English. She recognises what needs to be done to improve achievement further. The development plan identifies the right priorities although it lacks some clarity and coherence.
- The head of department has been well supported by the school's senior leadership, for instance in interpreting performance data.
- Departmental leadership has been further strengthened by the appointment of a Key Stage 3 coordinator and a review of provision in the light of recent changes to the English Framework.
- The department benefits from a strong team of specialist teachers with a good mix and range of experience.
- Past under-achievement reflects weaknesses in tracking pupils' achievement over time and identifying under-performance. Procedures are now clearer and the head of department is working both to monitor the progress of targeted pupils more closely and to put in place coherent additional support across the department.

Independent learning in English

Independent learning in English is good.

- The department's aims clearly identify the importance of independent learning in English.
- The scheme of work at Key Stage 3 includes a number of units that provide effective opportunities for independent work including the poetry anthology, a formal talk on a topic chosen by pupils, and the charity project. Pupils respond well to the choice available in units like these.
- The departmental programme of Reading Enhancement at Key Stage 3 provides opportunities for pupils to choose their own books and to read widely.
- Independent work is further enhanced by the emphasis on drama as a central element in English at Key Stage 3 and frequent opportunities for pupils to discuss and express their own ideas.
- Although provision for independent learning is less strong at GCSE, teachers continue to encourage pupils to think for themselves about

the texts they read and to contribute to discussions. Sixth form students are expected to use their initiative and work independently. The English Language course enables students to choose their own topic for detailed investigation.

Inclusion

Inclusion in English is good.

- The curriculum engages all learners; as a result, pupils enjoy English and nearly all girls achieve two good grades at GCSE.
- Progress is currently good. The department provides additional projects for the more able pupils and their performance improved last year.
- The special needs department is working increasingly closely with English. They provide some good intervention programmes for targeted pupils including the commercial scheme THRASS, paired reading and a home spelling programme.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving the tracking of pupils' progress across all key stages in order to ensure effective, early intervention where needed
- extending pupils' knowledge of strengths and weaknesses in their work through more effective and consistent use of curricular targets, and
- improving teachers' planning so that it meets the needs of different groups of learners more effectively.

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

Philip Jarrett HMI
Subject Adviser for English