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Dear Mr Spinks

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 06-07 November 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 six lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Standards are exceptionally high. Students' achievement varies across key stages but is outstanding overall.

- Attainment is very high at all key stages, including within the sixth form.
- Results at Advanced level improved significantly in 2007 suggesting that students made very good progress.
- Standards have risen over recent years at GCSE in English and around two thirds of pupils achieved grade A* or A in 2007. This represents very good progress, especially by more able pupils. English performs well in comparison with other subjects in the school.

- Standards are also very high in English literature although progress has slipped slightly in relation to English and a smaller proportion of pupils achieves the A* grade.
- Boys do well in English at GCSE and the gap between girls' and boys' performance is less than the national trend.
- Standards are very high at the end of Key Stage 3 although results vary from year to year. The school's view is that this reflects inconsistencies in external marking. Evidence from the inspection suggests that some pupils are capable of achieving more at Key Stage 3.
- Progress in lessons observed during the inspection was good overall.
- English makes a significant contribution to pupils' personal and social development. There are good opportunities for discussion in lessons and this helps pupils to become articulate and self-confident.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Lessons observed varied in quality but were good overall. Pupils are exceptionally well motivated and very keen to do well.
- Strengths of teaching observed included: very good subject knowledge; strong relationships with pupils; and good use of assessment for learning strategies.
- Older pupils are particularly positive about English lessons, praising teachers' enthusiasm, their support and approachability and their wide knowledge. Pupils at Key Stage 3 were more reserved in their comments and some older pupils spoke of a lack of challenge in the earlier years.
- A weakness in several lessons was a slow pace to learning with teachers not always expecting enough over the 70 minute periods or providing too little variety.
- All lessons observed made direct use of pupil self and peer assessment. This was also reflected in written comments on work. This helped pupils to see where they should improve their work.
- All pupils are aware of their target levels and the department has a systematic approach to identifying curricular targets through termly assessments which are shared with parents. Marking is sometimes inconsistent in the identification of areas for improvement.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is good with some outstanding features.

- A reasonable range of courses is provided at GCSE and Advanced level and English is a popular choice for both boys and girls.

- The curriculum meets the needs of pupils very well at Key Stage 4 where nearly all pupils reach very high standards in English and English Literature.
- There are some innovative aspects to the English curriculum. For instance, the programme directly addresses some aspects of the citizenship curriculum. Information and Communications Technology is well integrated and pupils show high levels of skills in word processing and through oral presentations.
- There is a wide range of enrichment activities with particularly good provision for theatre visits. There are regular school drama productions, a recently introduced Book Club and out-of-school revision classes for pupils.
- There are some strengths to the curriculum provided at Key Stage 3. The scheme of work builds in flexibility, giving teachers some choice over the content to be taught. Assessment is well integrated into the scheme, especially in writing. However, the response of some pupils, and variable test results in Year 9, suggest that the curriculum does not motivate and challenge pupils in the same way that the GCSE course does.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are outstanding in English.

- Effective departmental leadership has contributed to very high standards and achievement in English.
- The head of department makes a significant contribution to the school as a whole, providing leadership in areas as diverse as subject self-evaluation, data analysis and assessment for learning.
- The head of department is an effective classroom practitioner. He is very hard working and committed. He has established a cohesive and supportive team. Teachers work well together and provide good mutual support.
- Effective leadership is shown by the recent, marked improvement in Advanced level results. This was based on effective tracking of progress, identification of under-performance, and good provision of additional, targeted support.

Independent learning in English

Independent learning in English is good.

- The scheme of work at Key Stage 3 includes a number of units that provide good opportunities for independent work including the Tension unit, a formal talk on a topic chosen by pupils, and opportunities for independent reading.

- The department works with the library to support some research activities and is introducing a reading log to promote independent reading.
- Independent work is further enhanced by the provision for drama throughout the school. Drama and English lessons provide opportunities for pupils to express their ideas in discussion and to learn about working together.
- The Advanced level course contains good opportunities for pupils to carry out research and to make choices about particular assignments. Older pupils welcome the greater independence provided for them within Advanced level study. Some Key Stage 4 pupils would welcome more choice over topics for writing.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving achievement at Key Stage 3 by reviewing the extent to which teaching and the curriculum fully challenge and engage all pupils.

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