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Dear Mr Walker

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 19-20 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 nine lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Standards are average and achievement is satisfactory but improving.

- Standards are variable, especially at Key Stage 3, but are broadly in line with the national average. However, the trend is steadily upwards particularly at Key Stage 4. Results at Key Stage 3 showed a drop in writing standards last year but the papers have been sent back for re-marking.
- The unvalidated GCSE results in English for 2007 were slightly below the good standards achieved in 2006. However, standards in English compare well with performance in other subjects across the school. Increasing numbers of pupils are entered for GCSE English Literature and these results also compare well with other subjects.

- Historically, achievement in English has been satisfactory. Improved standards in 2006 showed good achievement across both key stages. The pattern was not as straightforward in 2007 and is further complicated by the provisional nature of the Key Stage 3 results. Nevertheless, good progress observed during the inspection confirms an improving trend in achievement in English. Able pupils did particularly well at GCSE in 2007.
- The department accepts that standards should be higher especially at Key Stage 3. The gap between girls' and boys' achievement is substantial and the department has also identified this as a priority for improvement.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Lessons observed were good overall and several were either outstanding or contained outstanding elements. The full range of evidence suggests that teaching has more impact at Key Stage 4 than Key Stage 3.
- The strengths of teaching observed included: very strong relationships with pupils; well planned lessons; good use of assessment for learning; and effective strategies that engaged and stimulated most pupils.
- Pupils behaved very well during the inspection. They were keen to learn and well motivated. They responded especially well to lively and enthusiastic teaching.
- Although lessons had a clear structure and featured some good starter activities, the learning objectives were sometimes too vague or described activities rather than aspects of learning. Pupils in lower ability sets were more difficult to motivate and lessons sometimes lacked sufficient challenge.
- Teachers gave pupils frequent opportunities for self- or peer-assessment and this helped pupils to know how to improve their work.
- Although marking varied in quality, the best was outstanding, combining positive feedback to pupils with clear identification of strengths and areas for improvement.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is good.

- Pupils mostly enjoy English and the curriculum meets their needs well, especially at Key Stage 4.
- The department has put in place detailed schemes of work at both key stages that provide effective guidance for teachers; this has been especially helpful in supporting recently qualified teachers of English.
- Increasing numbers of pupils are now entered for GCSE English Literature. The curriculum is also enhanced by drama in years 9-11.

Large numbers of pupils are entered for English GCSE in Year 10 as the school seeks to personalise the curriculum. A good variety of theatre trips also enhances provision in English.

- There is an effective transition unit in Year 7 that builds well on pupils' work in primary schools.
- The scheme of work for Key Stage 3 is detailed and balanced. It provides teachers with some choice over texts and approaches. Overall, pupils say that they enjoy work in English more at Key Stage 4 and that lessons in Key Stage 3 would be improved by more opportunities for drama, the use of ICT and speaking and listening work.
- The Year 9 curriculum is very closely focused on preparing pupils for the end-of-year tests. This is understandable as the department focuses on improving results. However, it seems to motivate pupils less and it may contribute to slightly less positive attitudes, especially among boys.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are good.

- There have been significant changes in English over recent years. This has led to improved schemes of work, a consistently good standard of teaching, and rising standards. This reflects good leadership in English together with support and challenge from senior school leaders.
- The head of department provides good, open and enthusiastic leadership. He has created a department that works well together, provides mutual support and shares good practice. The department is reflective and self-critical, willing to review what it does in the search for higher standards. There is a clear, shared sense of purpose.
- The head of department is also an effective classroom teacher and, with other colleagues, is able to model and exemplify good practice. This has had a positive effect on the work of recently qualified teachers in the department.
- Good, detailed schemes of work support teaching and provide clear but flexible guidance.
- The department tracks pupils' progress carefully through half-termly assessments. Pupils know their target levels and what is needed to improve their work. The performance data are used well to identify pupils for intervention programmes.

Independent learning in English

Independent learning in English is satisfactory.

- Some units of work at Key Stage 3, such as the History of Literature units, provide good opportunities for pupils to carry out independent research. This is often extended into the GCSE course.

- There is some provision at Key Stage 3 for independent reading and the development of study skills using the library.
- Pupils especially enjoy the programme of individual talks that are integrated within the GCSE course.
- Teachers provide a reasonable balance of support in writing together with some opportunities for choice, such as over different planning formats. Pupils also welcome the opportunity to express their views about the texts studied at GCSE.
- Older pupils suggested that opportunities for independent work decline after Year 8 in English.

Inclusion in English

Inclusion in English is good.

- The school runs a Literacy Unit that provides well managed support for a large number of pupils. The unit uses performance data well to identify pupils for a range of intervention strategies. These focus on weaknesses including writing, spelling and reading for meaning. Some older pupils are also used to support Year 7 pupils with reading.
- This is a substantial programme that meets pupils' needs well. The unit evaluates the progress of pupils systematically and has already identified slower progress in the reading programmes.
- It is not always clear how the work of the intervention programmes is consolidated by teaching in mainstream English lessons.
- The English department provides extra support through Booster classes at both key stages. English teachers form good relationships with pupils and care about their progress. Consequently, individual pupils are given good support where they need it.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- reviewing the Key Stage 3 curriculum to see how it might engage all pupils more effectively, especially boys, leading to better achievement,
- improving the level of challenge provided for pupils in lower ability sets, and
- consolidating the work of the Literacy Unit within mainstream English lessons.

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