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Mr M Murphy
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Dear Mr Murphy

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Sue Frater HMI on 4-5 February 2008 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 below average. Pupils' achievement is good.

- Standards are consistently below average at the end of all key stages. This reflects factors including low attainment on entry to the school, considerable mobility and an imbalance between boys and girls.
- The 2007 GCSE results were the school's best ever. Certain groups performed well including pupils with free school meals, some ethnic minority groups, and some pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. More able pupils tend to do less well although current evidence suggest that this is improving.
- Results in the A2 course were in line with the school's targets. They remained below average but all pupils achieved pass grades in 2007.

- Achievement has improved steadily at the end of Key Stage 4 and was good in 2007. The department performed well in relation to other departments and in comparison with other local schools. There is a rising trend in achievement at Key Stage 4. This was confirmed by good progress in lessons observed and by the school's own analysis of results of mock examinations. Progress at the end of Key Stage 3 is more variable.
- English makes a good contribution to the personal development of pupils through its emphasis on discussion and the exchange of views, together with a wide range of activities that enrich the curriculum.

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.
- Positive features of lessons included: enthusiastic teachers with good subject knowledge; well planned and structured lessons; very good relationships with pupils; and good focus on speaking and listening, with effective management of discussion.
- Where lessons were not as effective, there were sometimes lower expectations and slow pace. Opportunities were missed to model aspects of writing for pupils.
- Pupils are very positive about English. This was especially the case with older pupils who showed considerable enthusiasm for the subject. Pupils spoke powerfully about the support and care provided, the commitment and energy of teachers, and the use of a range of approaches that made learning "fun".
- Most pupils have a clear understanding of their targets for improvement in English. This reflects marking that is mostly detailed and helpful and the effective use by teachers of curricular targets.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is good.

- Pupils enjoy English and the curriculum meets their needs well, especially at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form.
- The school provides a good range of courses for pupils, including English, drama and media studies at GCSE and in the sixth form.
- The scheme of work is broad and balanced, with a good emphasis on developing speaking and listening.
- Pupils are less challenged and engaged by the Key Stage 3 curriculum and this is reflected in poorer results. The scheme of work is detailed and helpful to teachers. However, it focuses quite narrowly in Year 9 on test preparation and appears to lack challenge and progression overall. The curriculum map does not include systematic provision for

important aspects of English such as independent reading or poetry across the key stage.

- The department provides very good support for many pupils through a wide range of additional intervention strategies. The school has also improved provision for enrichment activities through visits by poets, writers and theatre groups.
- Information and communication technology is currently under-used by pupils in English.
- The school is a Specialist School for the Humanities, with English as a lead subject. This has generated additional resources which have helped to enrich the curriculum in English and provide extra support for many pupils. It has also helped the school to develop approaches to literacy across the curriculum, as well as facilitating collaborative work and sharing good practice with primary and other secondary schools.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management of English are outstanding.

- The school has managed to improve standards and achievement, especially at Key Stage 4, despite significant changes to staffing and leadership in English over the past year.
- The quality of documentation is excellent. This includes full schemes of work that support new teachers, consistent and detailed planning by teachers across the department, and very thorough development plans and self-evaluation.
- The department makes very good use of performance data to analyse the progress of individual pupils, to identify trends and to put in place well targeted intervention programmes.
- The school has a good understanding of strengths and weaknesses in English. There is a clear sense of direction, with appropriate priorities identified. The newly appointed head of department already has a good understanding of the issues and the department has been well supported by the senior leadership team. Delegation is effective and members of the department play a full role in its development.
- Monitoring and evaluation are very thorough and systematic, with feedback provided to teachers on planning, pupils' work and teaching and learning. As a result, the school's self evaluation in English is good.
- The capacity for further improvement is very good, provided that the school is able to maintain the current good quality of teaching and leadership.

Independent learning in English

Independent learning in English is satisfactory.

- Some units of work at Key Stage 3, such as the revised *Richard III* scheme, provide good opportunities for pupils to carry out independent work. Other examples include the opportunities for pupils to teach their own lessons in GCSE and the use of techniques such as Socratic dialogue.
- There is a good emphasis on speaking and listening and pupils enjoy regular opportunities, especially at Key Stage 4, to express their own views. Drama makes a significant contribution to pupils' group work and initiative.
- The focus on preparing pupils for tests and examinations reduces some opportunities for independent learning both in lessons and through homework.
- Pupils are encouraged to read widely out of school but the department does not build on this work sufficiently. There is also too little emphasis at present on carrying out independent research and using ICT.

Inclusion in English

Inclusion in English is outstanding.

- The school provides a substantial programme of support for under-achieving pupils. This includes an Easter school, Saturday clubs, other revision classes, mentoring programmes and buddy readers. A significant number of pupils are involved in these activities.
- The department also offers a number of additional intervention programmes such as use of the Literacy Progress units and the Learning Challenge. The school evaluates the impact of the different programmes very well.
- Performance data suggests that some groups of disaffected and vulnerable pupils do especially well in English. This was confirmed by discussions with pupils as well as lesson observations.
- The high quality of care and inclusive approach in lessons means that all pupils are supported well in English.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- reviewing the Key Stage 3 curriculum to see how it might engage and challenge all pupils more effectively
- developing opportunities for independent learning for all pupils, especially the more able.

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