

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



22 February 2008

Dr J McAuley
Headteacher
St Francis Xavier School
Darlington Road
Richmond
DL10 7DA

Dear Dr McAuley

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 06 - 07 February 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 pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of nine lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Standards are above average and achievement is good.

- Students join the school with slightly above average levels of attainment overall. All are entered for GCSE examinations in English Language and Literature and results are significantly better than the national average.
- Achievement is usually good but has occasionally fluctuated. There was a significant improvement last year when a good proportion of students reached the highest grades at GCSE and Level 6 in Key Stage 3 tests. As the school recognises, too few achieved Level 7. There are indications that middle- and higher-attaining girls have not as a group equalled the strong progress made by others. Despite good progress overall in English, weaknesses in writing, in both basic and higher order skills, limit some students' achievement.

- There is much to enjoy in English lessons and students have very good work habits. They discuss sensitive issues confidently with each other and are genuinely interested in other viewpoints and cultures.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

Teaching and learning are good.

- Teachers have very good relationships with students and engage their interest through practical ways of learning. Conscientious marking and reassuring support mean all students know they are valued and they respond with willing effort.
- In the best lessons, teachers planned well for challenge and gained a clear sense of their students' progress through their careful listening and skilful questioning. There were outstanding features: students were really stretched by some of the speaking and listening activities and by reading and writing tasks which helped them learn for themselves.
- Learning was sometimes limited because lessons lacked clearly defined outcomes for learners. Students sometimes needed clearer targets and better information about what to do to reach them. Students sometimes did not articulate their ideas fully or respond to each others' contributions because teachers over-controlled discussion.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum is good.

- Students spoken to say they enjoy the interesting variety they encounter in English. They taste a good range of reading and many regularly read privately. Teachers' recommendations have enthused readers to try different authors. Competent young students run the school library and resource centre, a place which some in Year 7 see as one of the appealing features of the school.
- Students learn how to research independently. Teachers bring topical material into the classroom and introduce students to useful websites, making use of the good information and communication technology facilities.
- Students' writing tasks give them some chances to be original and creative. Speaking and listening and drama activities are specified in the Scheme of Learning for all age groups, though teachers' confidence in leading them varies.
- A popular GCSE in Media Studies has broadened the opportunities for students. Students enjoy the good range of special events such as drama productions and visiting authors. Many are very willing to read to a large audience, for example, in the school's religious services.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are satisfactory.

- As headteacher, you challenge the subject well by pinpointing where students' performance needs to improve. A cross-curricular review of individual students' standards and progress has usefully informed the self evaluation of the subject.
- As a result, the head of English has led the dedicated team of experienced specialists and non-specialists to improve in key areas and trends in outcomes are moving upwards. The direction for further improvement is being clarified with help from the local authority. Current work to sharpen assessment in English and to make sure lessons provide the right challenge and support for all students represents a useful start.
- Clearer guidance and monitoring to embed the department's best practice in all lessons are needed if the school is to produce outstanding achievement.

Independent learning in English

Provision for independent learning in English is satisfactory, with some good features.

- Time for private reading and book recommendations encourage independent reading, though systems to monitor the effect, for example by using the new library borrowing system, are still being developed.
- The scheme of work provides for independent learning within many modules. Students sometimes choose their own form or topic for writing. Homework is quite challenging and is reliably done.
- The best teaching made good use of drama and peer evaluation to develop independent learning. For example, Year 11 students gave original and effective persuasive speeches: practice in front of the mirrors in the drama studio, with a lectern as a useful prop, and the supportive feedback of fellow students, contributed well to building their skills. However, some teaching did not sufficiently guide students towards self-reliance.

Inclusion

Inclusion is good.

- Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, those learning English as a second language, and the small numbers taking free school meals generally make good progress in line with their peers. This is as a result of the good care and support shown for each individual.

- Extra sessions help fill gaps in reading and spelling skills and the limited extra help in lessons is effective. More students are arriving at a very early stage of learning English, stretching resources for intervention thinly. There are suitable plans to increase English teachers' skills this area.
- Their good engagement in English lessons explains why the boys' results are closer to the girls' than is typical nationally. The department recognises that it needs to tackle a degree of underachievement by abler girls. When students need a boost to reach their expected grade at GCSE, the department provides it. However, the department needs more precise information about students' strengths and weaknesses at an earlier stage to reduce the need for remedial action.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- spreading the good practice in the department in key areas such as planning challenging lessons and assessing progress
- making sure students have a good grasp of what they need to do to reach their English targets.

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. 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

Susan Bowles
Her Majesty's Inspector