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Mr J Jackson
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Dear Mr Jackson

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 17-18 March 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 pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of eight lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is good and standards in English are above average.

- Attainment on entry fluctuates from year to year but is broadly average overall. By the end of Year 9 attainment is above average although relatively few students attain the higher levels. The department has recognised reading in Key Stage 3 as a priority area.
- Key Stage 4 English language results improved in 2007 to being slightly above average. English literature results were well above average. The department's overall contextual value added has been rising confirming that achievement is good in English.
- AS and A2 examination results in 2007 were above average although few students attained the higher grades. Literature was the subject with the highest VA scores in the school.

- All students, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve equally well.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning in English is good.

- The department has a long tradition of teachers agreeing what constitutes good teaching. Teachers implement the minimum agreed requirement consistently and often do significantly better.
- Teaching observed was never less than good with some outstanding features. Teachers are well prepared, receive their students at the door and start the lesson promptly. They vary activities offering differentiated tasks and continuously evaluating work. Their good questioning strategies elicit good responses from students who clearly like English.
- Lessons offer many opportunities for self and peer evaluation. Teachers show a high level of trust in their students who respond in a mature way. Teachers are now setting extension work in order to stretch the higher attainers further.
- Assessment is outstanding. It gives students a very clear idea of how well they are doing, what they need to do next to improve their work and how to attain the targets agreed with them. Assessment also constantly revisits targets.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in English is good.

- Last year's strong focus on writing in Key Stage 3 has produced significant improvements. Currently the department is successfully focusing on improving reading in Key Stage 3.
- The department has been successful in ensuring that students understand what is required of them in tests and examinations. Booster classes focus successfully on implementing the marking scheme with students being given opportunities to evaluate their own and each other's work.
- Students speak highly of the strong and exciting enrichment programme. Links and visits enhance opportunities to celebrate British cultural diversity.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management of English are good with some outstanding features.

- The new head of department has worked hard and successfully to improve on an already good department. She has established effective working links with colleagues in the department with the result that planning and implementation are producing very good results.

- Planning is comprehensive and is based on excellent self evaluation and outstanding assessment. Consequently, schemes of work are very good and this leads to effective lesson planning.
- The department and the school's senior leaders fully understand what is going well and what needs to be improved, for example ensuring that higher attainers perform better. One of the direct results of this understanding has been the improvement in standards with more students currently set to attain the higher levels and grades in 2008. Another has been the improvements in writing made in Key Stage 3. Currently, work is being done on further improving reading in Key Stage 3 as a priority.

Independent learning in English

Provision for independent learning is good.

- Students speak very highly of the way that they are fully trusted by their English teachers. The result is that they feel that they are being allowed to be independent and to make choices in their learning.
- Opportunities to work independently are routine with students responding in a mature way. Sixth form students are expected to research a literary subject and to make a presentation of findings to their peers.
- Students, especially the older ones, use ICT routinely and carry out independent research.

Inclusion

Inclusion in English is good.

- Students say that the English department is a "home from home." They speak very highly of their teachers and quite clearly feel included in all aspects of its work.
- Teachers vary activities as a matter of routine thus ensuring that all preferred learning styles are given opportunities to be productive.
- The department has recognised that higher attainers need to be stretched further. Consequently, there is a current successful focus on ensuring that extension work is offered and that booster classes are put on regularly.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving reading standards further in Key Stage 3; and
- raising the standards of higher attainers especially in Key Stage 3 and in the sixth form.

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

Faysal Mikdadi
Additional Inspector