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Mr A Barnes
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Dear Mr Barnes

Ofsted survey inspection programme - English and mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Gill Close HMI on 18 - 19 June 2008 to look at work in English and mathematics.

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, students and other professionals, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of parts of thirteen lessons.

English

The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good with some outstanding features.

Achievement and standards in English

In English, standards are above average. Achievement is at least good.

- Attainment on entry to the school in Year 8 is slightly above average.
- Students make good progress at Key Stage 3 and outstanding progress at Key Stage 4.
- In 2007, results for Level 5+ at Key Stage 3 were above average. At Level 6+, results have shown marked improvement over the last three years and were well above average. Results at Level 7 were above average. At Key Stage 4, results for English and English literature, including A* and A grades, were well above average. Achievement in the sixth form is good.

- Standards of speaking and listening are good. Students are confident and articulate speakers and careful, reflective and critical listeners. They are considered and analytical readers and convey complex ideas in insightful writing.
- Provision for personal development is outstanding. Students have extensive opportunities for pair, group and independent work and readily offer their views in lessons. Engagement in texts shows considerable maturity. They are encouraged strongly to form personal opinions, have good opportunities to present, discuss and persuade and do so with well-considered and evidenced arguments.

Quality of teaching and learning in English

The quality of teaching and learning in English is good. Some teaching observed was outstanding.

- Enthusiastic, creative and interesting teaching motivates and engages students in their learning, meets their differing needs well and promotes independence strongly.
- Expectations are high and excellent relationships between staff and students and students themselves contribute significantly to effective learning.
- Lessons observed were planned very well. Teachers have excellent subject knowledge and use this very well to secure progression through clear learning outcomes, careful and systematic teaching of skills, very well chosen resources and a good range of strategies. Good questioning, explanation and discussion probes and extends learning. Students enjoy their learning, collaborate very well, work hard on challenging tasks and take pride in their achievements.
- Students are prepared very well for tests, examinations and the demands of English post 16. Marking is supportive, challenging and gives good advice to students on how to improve. Marking of Advanced level work is excellent.
- Some excellent practice in the use of Assessment for Learning and information and communication technology (ICT) contributes to raised achievement and students are increasingly involved in assessing their own work and shaping provision. Reports to parents and associated targets are appropriate, although some comments focus more on behaviour than learning.

Quality of the English curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in English is good.

- Provision secures balance, breadth and progression, promotes reading for pleasure strongly and includes good opportunities for enrichment. Speaking and listening, drama and media are strong features of provision.
- Very well chosen texts and other materials provide good opportunities to examine cultural, topical and controversial issues. ICT is used judiciously and well, although regular access to computers is limited.
- Home learning is set regularly and provides a good range of opportunities for independent work. Literacy is promoted strongly across the school, using the expertise of the English department well.

- Inclusion is outstanding. The department advocates strongly high achievement for all and the needs of learners are met well. A good range of interventions are targeted well and have positive impact on achievement. Support staff provide effective guidance to individuals and groups and contribute well to learning.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management of English are good.

- The department has a clear sense of direction and an explicit focus on high achievement through excellent provision. Clear roles and responsibilities, a comprehensive and accurate understanding of strengths and weaknesses, good provision for professional development and highly collaborative, self-critical, hard-working practitioners secure high standards. The capacity for further improvement is outstanding.
- The progress of students is tracked regularly, individual targets raise attainment and analysis of data informs interventions well. Work is underway to improve the efficiency of analysis.
- Priorities are addressed well, notably for Advanced level teaching, although success criteria in departmental action plans are not sufficiently defined, making progress difficult to measure.
- Although monitoring secures increasingly consistent provision, activity does not yet comprise a systematic programme of review.

Areas for improvement in English, which we discussed, included:

- implementing a coherent and systematic programme of monitoring and evaluation
- defining measurable success criteria in departmental action plans.

Mathematics

The overall effectiveness of mathematics was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is good and standards are exceptionally high.

- Students enter the school with slightly above average attainment and make good progress in each key stage to reach exceptionally high standards at the end of Key Stage 4. This prepares them very well for the future, and a particularly high proportion of them continue to study mathematics, with the school teaching Year 12 students for the first time this year. They achieve well at AS level.
- In 2007, targets at both key stages were met, except the statutory target for Level 5+ and the technology college target for Level 7+. The school's evidence suggests that current students are expected to meet the 2008 targets.
- Students develop independence in their study and reflect on the way they learn through the school-wide focus on 'building learning power'. Some speak

enthusiastically of the good group discussions that have helped build their understanding. Their independence is also extended through the increasing use of individualised online home learning and revision. These stand them in good stead in the sixth form and future life.

- While many students show a clear understanding of the mathematics they are learning, this is not consistent and some students do not have a good grasp of why methods work or how they might be applied to a range of problems.
- Students work hard in lessons, are keen to do well and enjoy mathematics, although many say they would prefer to have more interactive and practical activities.

Quality of teaching and learning of mathematics

The quality of teaching and learning of mathematics is good.

- Some of the teaching is outstanding, based on a thorough knowledge of the students and interesting interactive work that gives them well-tailored support when they need it, without leading them unduly. The strongest teaching provides a firm conceptual understanding that helps students discuss and reason flexibly, and enables them to explain clearly what they are doing and why. It uses group work, practical and interactive whiteboard resources excellently to achieve this.
- Where teaching is not as strong, there are often good rich activities, but the way they are used does not make it clear to students precisely what they have to do, or give them a conceptual understanding of the work. Lesson planning does not focus on how each student's progress can be optimised and checked. Teachers do not monitor responses carefully enough to identify what students understand and ensure that the lesson is challenging for them all. Consequently some work is incomplete or shakily grasped. Some students feel that too long is spent on text book exercises.
- Students work hard and value the assistance that teachers and teaching assistants provide in and out of lessons. Relationships in lessons are very good. Students use self-assessment effectively with teachers to inform revision prior to examinations, but it is used less consistently to focus all teaching. Students know the levels they are working at and their targets but they do not assess their own progress against these targets frequently. Some say they want more guidance about what they need to do to reach the next level.
- The best marking helps students to move forward but much emphasises further practising from individual computer programs or doing more of a type of question rather than addressing the specific misconception revealed and setting a target to support and check whether it has been overcome.
- Progress checks each term identify well those students who are falling behind expectations and lead to interventions, many of which relate to general behavioural aspects rather than mathematical ones. There is room for the large amount of data the school holds to be streamlined for easier tracking of students' progress.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is good.

- It offers a range of ways to meet students' needs. The higher attainers have an accelerated route through additional mathematics to AS level, which successfully recruits in large numbers while maintaining high GCSE grades for those students who are entered early. The lower attainers have opportunities through functional numeracy to gain confidence and build up towards GCSE. Support for students with learning difficulties or disabilities is very sensitive and well matched to need.
- Stimulating activities are available but the schemes of work do not specify tasks or approaches to ensure that every student is entitled to them or systematically build up their skills of using and applying mathematics. Neither does monitoring ensure entitlement.
- There are enhancement opportunities for higher attainers, such as Mathematics Challenges. Revision and support provision are good. Students have access to individual online materials, although they are not used consistently across the school, for example for home learning.
- The technology college status has effectively supported the broadening of the curriculum and increased the use of ICT.

Leadership and management of mathematics

The leadership and management of mathematics are good.

- The school's systems for analysing examination and test performance, gathering students' opinions through questionnaires, curriculum review of departments and departmental self-evaluation have correctly evaluated the quality of mathematics provision and identified appropriate areas for development. Action plans link to the recommendations from these but do not specify closely enough the actions, intended impact, or success criteria. Nevertheless, they have led to continued improvement.
- Staff provide a range of strengths which the new head of department has built on effectively, harnessing them through collaboration and her enthusiasm. Staffing resources are managed and supported well. Although monitoring of books and home learning is carried out regularly, it has not led to a substantial increase in consistency.
- Lesson observations, including by peers, have contributed well to improvements in teaching, although they do not always identify areas for development. Some judgements are generous as they do not place sufficient emphasis on students' progress.

Subject issue: the effectiveness of the school's approaches to improving the quality of teaching and learning in mathematics

- The school-wide focus on 'building learning power' permeates learning, so students bring this expectation to mathematics. Whilst it is more overt in some mathematics lessons than others, it underlies most of the teaching approaches,

even when they are based heavily on text book exercises, and has contributed to a significant improvement in learning.

- Through peer observation and video recording of lessons, staff have improved their teaching and how they communicate with students.
- Staff have used their expertise well to develop curriculum materials and share ideas with colleagues on how they may be taught. This has raised teaching quality, particularly where the activities have been used well.

Areas for improvement in mathematics, which we discussed, included:

- increasing conceptual understanding through core activities and teaching
- involving students more frequently in assessing their own progress against clear targets, with guidance on how to improve
- focusing lesson observation and evaluation more on students' progress and understanding, and on identifying improvement in areas for development
- sharpening departmental planning with precisely defined actions and measurable success criteria.

We hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop English and mathematics in the school.

As explained in our previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and local Learning and 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

Rosemary Matthews
Her Majesty's Inspector