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Mrs L Hughes
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Hughes

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Gill Jones HMI on 03-04 June 2008 to look at work 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 in English are well above average and students' achievement is good.

- Standards have improved over recent years and are consistently well above average at the end of both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. Although girls do better than boys, the gap at GCSE is not as wide as the national picture.
- Achievement is good overall although performance data suggests that students make more progress at Key Stage 4 than Key Stage 3. Able students achieve especially well and this is reflected at all levels including performance in the sixth form. However, some less able students do not make enough progress and this has been identified as a priority by the department.
- Standards in the different courses provided by the English department in the sixth form are at least in line with the national average and

usually better than that. Students achieve well, in both English Literature and English Language.

- Progress in lessons observed was good overall but varied across classes, with some less able students struggling to achieve well in the bottom ability sets. Most students have well developed speaking and listening skills and this contributed to some effective discussion work in lessons observed.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Lessons observed were good overall although learning was sometimes reduced by the limited motivation of students in the lower sets.
- Students overall reported positive views about English and this is reflected in the popularity of the subject in the sixth form. Students praised lively teaching, a varied range of activities and opportunities for discussion, especially in Key Stage 3.
- Strengths in lessons observed included: good relationships with students; the use of a range of active approaches that engaged most students, especially as interesting ways into texts; effective teacher questioning; and a good level of challenge for more able students.
- In the most effective lessons, teachers chose a limited range of learning objectives which were well understood by students and clearly directed the choice of activities. In other lessons, the learning objectives were not sufficiently clear and this sometimes confused students. In some lessons, planning was not effective enough in meeting the needs of the less able students in classes.
- The quality of teachers' marking is variable. Consistent use is made of the marking code. However, the effectiveness of the feedback given to students about areas for improvement varies and curricular target sheets are not always well used. This contributes to the uncertainty expressed by some students about how to improve their work.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is good.

- The English curriculum has a positive impact on the good achievement and engagement of most students. The department provides a wide range of courses at GCSE level and beyond, including in language, literature, media and drama.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is broad and balanced and motivates most students well. It is being reviewed in the light of the new proposals and the changes build in more pace and integrate assessment well. There is a good emphasis on developing students' independent reading, although some opportunities are missed to discuss, challenge and extend their reading.

- The curriculum at Key Stage 4 meets the needs of most students, including the more able, well. Nearly all students are entered for English Literature and do well. The department is aware that the curriculum fails to engage a small number of less able students and it needs to consider how to maintain their interest through the more effective use of media, drama, ICT and other active approaches.
- The curriculum is enriched by a range of additional activities including a writing club, public speaking and other competitions, a Readathon, and occasional visits involving writers and theatre groups.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are good.

- The department's leadership has successfully improved standards and achievement in English over recent years.
- The head of department and other senior colleagues are thoughtful, reflective and keen to listen to advice. There is a genuine desire to continue and extend recent developments. The leadership has a good understanding of the department's strengths and weaknesses.
- The department comprises a potentially strong team with a range of experience and specialist knowledge.
- Although the department has correctly identified the main priorities for development, the subject improvement plan lacks specificity in setting out the necessary actions to be taken and the means of evaluating success.
- The department is currently developing its systems to track the progress of individual students. This includes integrating the APP tasks and approaches within the existing scheme of work. It does not yet use diagnostic data from students' work effectively enough either in planning to meet particular needs in lessons or to set appropriate curricular targets for students.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving the achievement of students who arrive in Year 7 with standards that are below average
- making better use of assessment data in order to plan more effectively for the range of ability in classes and to extend students' understanding of how to improve their work.

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 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

Philip Jarrett HMI
Subject Adviser for English