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Mr M Shevill
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Dear Mr Shevill

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 06-07 October to look at work in English.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject the visit included a focus on our current survey theme of creativity 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 above average and achievement is good.

- Standards are above average at the end of Key Stages 3 and 4.
- Achievement across Key Stages 3 and 4 is good overall. This is confirmed by CVA data over the past three years as well as progress in lessons during the inspection.
- The performance of students in Advanced level English courses is mixed. Standards and achievement are good in the combined English Language and Literature course. However, results are weaker in the separate English Language and English Literature courses where students' achievement is below average.
- There are no significant differences between the achievements of different groups of students in the school. The gap between boys' and girls' performance in English is in line with average.

- Students are mostly very keen to learn and show positive attitudes in lessons. However, evidence from the inspection suggested that some boys in lower ability sets were less well motivated and that this affected their progress in lessons.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning of English is good.

- Teaching and learning are good overall although there is considerable variability in quality across the department. Most students enjoy English and speak well of teachers' efforts to engage them in learning through lively activities.
- There are very good relationships between teachers and students in most lessons. This encourages students to contribute to discussions and work hard.
- Most lessons were effective because teachers use a wide range of effective strategies that ensure good pace and engage students' interest. Teachers use a good variety of resources to meet students' different learning needs. In less effective lessons, the range of approaches was too limited. As a result, the pace slackened and students lost concentration.
- Other weaknesses in the less effective lessons were unclear learning objectives, missed opportunities to model writing for students, and occasional limitations of accommodation and access to Information and Communication Technology resources.
- Strengths of assessment include good use of self and peer assessment, a focus on all aspects of English including speaking and listening, and reviews of learning in lessons. However, some students were not clear enough about ways of improving their work.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is good.

- The school enters most students for GCSE English Literature and some also opt to follow a drama course. There is a good choice of English courses in the sixth form. Some flexibility is also provided through early entry for the Year 9 national tests and the use of entry level qualifications at Key Stage 4.
- The department has just re-written its scheme of work for Key Stage 3. The programme has many innovative elements. It is project based and aims to develop the skills that students need for the world beyond school. Assessment is fully integrated and the scheme is well supported by interesting opportunities for independent learning in homework. There is also good potential to link well with other subjects and to involve a wide range of adult practitioners such as charity workers.

- The department is aware that the current Key Stage 4 curriculum does not always engage all students including some boys and some lower attaining students.
- The curriculum is enriched by theatre visits and other visiting speakers.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are good.

- The new subject leaders have maintained stability and standards during a period of some staffing turbulence. The head of department and second i/c English work well together. They provide a good sense of direction to English work, as seen particularly in the new Key Stage 3 scheme.
- Teachers work well together. This was evident through their collaborative work in writing the new Key Stage 3 programme. The department is now more stable and there is good capacity for further improvement.
- The subject leaders have a broadly accurate view of strengths and weaknesses in English. However, performance data and other evidence are not yet used well enough to identify the most important actions needed to raise standards further.
- Procedures for enabling the subject leader to monitor and evaluate the quality of teaching and learning remain largely informal and this does not help her to identify weaknesses and share existing good practice.

Creativity in English

The subject leaders have clear views about the nature of creativity in English although the issues have not yet been fully discussed within the department. Their view is that creativity needs to be developed through independent work and this is being encouraged within the new Key Stage 3 scheme and approaches to homework. Some teachers made good use of innovative strategies for engaging students and most lessons featured good collaborative group work with opportunities for students to discuss and express their own views. Students generally considered that opportunities for creative work were reduced within the GCSE course.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising achievement in Advanced level English Literature and English Language courses
- improving subject self-evaluation, including monitoring of the impact of teaching and learning
- identifying those strategies that motivate students in lower ability sets and contribute to better progress.

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