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Ms E Robins
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Dear Ms Robins

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 5-6 November 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 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 ten lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Standards are above average and achievement is satisfactory.

- Students achieve above average results in national tests and examinations. Their good literacy skills include a developing understanding of contemporary media.
- Students enter the school with above average standards in English. In general, the proportion of students who make two levels of progress in each key stage is no better than average. A significant minority make no progress in Key Stage 3, and some who have higher prior attainment do not reach the highest levels and GCSE grades which would be expected. Diagnostic assessment has indicated some weaknesses in articulating their ideas which are evident in their work.

- Most students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make the expected progress. The gap between boys' and girls' performance in English is broadly average.
- Progress in all three post-16 courses is at least satisfactory and sometimes better.
- Students have generally positive attitudes to English, appreciating the way teachers make most lessons interesting, encourage individual enthusiasms and provide good support and guidance. Sixth formers enjoy their lively lessons, including the well-led discussions.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

Teaching and learning are satisfactory.

- Efforts to maximise students' progress are having an impact, but this is as yet uneven. The teaching which was observed was never less than satisfactory. It included much that was good, and elements which were outstanding.
- Positive relationships and good guidance give students the confidence to strive for higher standards, and, in the better lessons seen, the skills and motivation to think for themselves.
- Lessons are typically well structured with a progressive sequence of varied, interesting and purposeful activities.
- Marking is helpful and usually gives students useful advice on how to improve their work. Some effective use is made of self and peer assessment and reviews of learning in lessons. Diagnostic assessment is beginning to make an impact on the quality of planning for learning.
- However, sometimes teachers do not plan, manage or monitor learning well enough to ensure all students are fully involved and challenged. Lessons sometimes lack a crisp start and clarity of direction; motivation and the pace of progress then slow. Occasionally limitations of accommodation and access to information and communication technology resources (ICT) hamper learning.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum is good.

- Schemes of work are clear, and the resources used are interesting and helpful to students; they experience a broad range of classic and contemporary texts and stimulating activities.
- Developing links with primary schools and improving use of assessment are helping teachers get students off to a more challenging start in Year 7 and to sustain progression. A new integrated programme in Key Stage 3 gives good opportunities for developing literacy.
- Interventions for those making slower progress in literacy are effective. Good training and teamwork with the adults who work with students - including sixth formers - is a significant factor.

- Virtually all students take English Language and Literature GCSE and drama is an option. Advanced level courses in English Literature, Language, Theatre and Media Studies are popular.
- The good range of enrichment opportunities builds on students' interests, for example, in performance and broadcasting.
- ICT in the form of projectors and a new visualiser are in most classes being put to good use, for example to help students evaluate writing together.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are satisfactory and improving well.

- The principal teacher of English is highly committed, well informed and a good role model. He has maintained stability and standards during a period of some staffing turbulence. With good support from your senior and administrative team, performance data has been used to identify key strengths and the weaknesses of the department. This has led to a cogent action plan to improve achievement and enjoyment of learning. Provision is improving, and there are some early signs of positive impact on progress.
- The principal teacher has shared his expectations and strategies for improvement clearly and inspired his team of ten specialist teachers to work together to achieve them. The varied talents in the team are in some ways used well: for example, new ICT resources are rapidly being put to effective use in most classes, helped by the support of an advanced skills teacher (AST). Collaborative review and planning happens regularly, aided by a day spent reviewing provision together and the chance to teach some units simultaneously.
- Capacity has been enhanced by two middle leaders who are increasingly effective in identifying and tackling underachievement and leading innovation. More systematic, focussed and rigorous monitoring, with clearer feedback to teachers, has resulted in better accountability and understanding of expectations, for example, in the accuracy and use of assessment. However, the good and outstanding elements of practice seen in several classrooms are not yet seen consistently.

Creativity in English

Partly in response to student feedback, the department is seeking to build more creativity into schemes of work, and examples were seen in several classrooms, including:

- intriguing, open ended activities such as a starter which stimulated individual thinking about word meaning and made students want to share their different ideas

- sensitive listening to students, and skilful questioning, which made them feel safe about taking risks, for example, in sharing their personal and tentative responses to texts
- encouragement for students to see themselves as creative practitioners, for example, shaping the form and content of writing for themselves
- developing the skills for creative control, for example, by using the visualiser to help students share in refining an example of their own writing.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving achievement
- sharing the good practice identified by rigorous monitoring, for example, in leading learning through discussion and collaborative work, and in planning how learning will take place
- improving the consistency of the quality of teaching and learning.

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

Susan Bowles
Her Majesty's Inspector