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Ms J Acklam
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Dear Ms Acklam

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 11-12 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 seven lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English are below average. However, students' achievement is outstanding.

- Standards are very low on entry to the school with evidence of a widening gap between reading and writing.
- Standards have been consistently below average at the end of Key Stages 3 and 4 over recent years. However, there is a clear upward trend to results. Unvalidated results for both key stages in 2008 are considerably better than before. The GCSE results for English are broadly in line with average and this reflects especially good progress for these students.
- Achievement across the two key stages is outstanding, as confirmed by the CVA data over the past three years which places the school in the

top 10% nationally for English. GCSE results confirm that students do well in comparison with other subjects and the department is also successful at meeting, and often exceeding, very challenging targets.

- There are no significant differences between the achievements of different groups of students in the school. The department tracks progress very carefully and intervenes where the evidence suggests there might be an issue. For example, a programme was introduced last year to improve the performance of white girls.
- Students are mostly very keen to learn and show positive attitudes in lessons. Many students lack basic skills in English on entry to the school, including confidence in expressing their ideas. However, teachers work hard to build up their confidence and the lively and interactive lessons make a very good contribution to their personal development.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning of English is outstanding.

- Students speak very highly about their English teachers. They praise enjoyable lessons with a variety of interactive tasks. Older students in particular value the support and extra assistance provided in the GCSE course.
- Lessons observed were consistently good in quality with some elements that were outstanding.
- Very good progress by students is based above all on excellent relationships with teachers, a positive classroom environment and high expectations of behaviour. Most teachers are experienced, have good subject knowledge and manage learning effectively.
- Other effective features of teaching observed included: very good planning; clear learning objectives that are well understood by students; consistent use of self and peer assessment that students find very helpful; lessons that give students opportunities to take responsibility and exercise leadership; and interesting content that engages and motivates students.
- Occasional weaknesses observed included excessive pace at times that gave students too few opportunities to think and reflect, slow starts to lessons, and difficulties in planning for lessons that straddled the lunch or morning break.
- Assessment is very good. Students know about their current levels of achievement and what needs to be improved because of clear learning objectives in lessons, the explicit sharing of success and assessment criteria, good marking and effective curricular targets.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is outstanding.

- The curriculum meets students' needs well and enables all to make very good progress. All students achieve a GCSE in English. Although the numbers entered for English Literature are below average, they have increased over the past couple of years and both drama and media studies are available as option choices at Key Stage 4.
- The department has detailed schemes of work in both key stages, supported by good resources, and this contributes to consistent practice across different classes. The curriculum includes some innovative units that engage students well such as the Shakespeare/Big Brother work in Year 7 and the Mr Men work in Year 8.
- The Key Stage 3 scheme is substantially based around the study of narrative fiction and the department should consider ways of extending poetry, media and non-literary work across Years 7-9. In addition, opportunities are currently missed to promote and monitor students' independent, wider reading.
- Arrangements to support low attaining students are very thorough. The department tracks progress carefully and provides additional intervention programmes, taught by classroom assistants, to meet particular needs. In addition, a great deal of extra support is provided to help students do well in the GCSE course.
- There are good opportunities for students to use the information and communication technology (ICT) resources available within the department and many students word process much of their writing, especially in the GCSE course. Students also enjoy using the Interactive White Board across all year groups. However, there is scope to develop other uses of ICT in English including for research and communication purposes and to create their own moving image work.
- The department provides a good range of enrichment activities. This includes a programme of theatre visits for all year groups, occasional visits to the school by writers and examiners, numerous competitions such as the mini-saga writing competition, and a school magazine. There is also a carefully planned programme for gifted and talented students.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are outstanding.

- The head of department provides very good leadership. She has strong views about English based around the aims articulated in the subject handbook. She is thoughtful and hard-working. She receives good support from an experienced and highly committed team who are open

to new ideas but always put students first. Delegation is good and teachers work well together, sharing ideas and providing mutual challenge and support.

- You and other senior colleagues provide very good support to English through clear leadership. In addition, you encourage the team to be innovative and to take risks; this has contributed to successful outcomes for students.
- Monitoring and evaluation are rigorous and effective. The school makes use of a wide range of evidence and this has led to good and secure self evaluation. A particular strength is the thorough and principled approach to seeking feedback from students which has involved students in observing lessons as well as attending department meetings and giving their own views about English.
- The department tracks students' progress well and uses this information to analyse trends and to support students who need extra help.

Creativity in English

The school has given clear consideration to the future development of the curriculum, including creativity. This has informed discussions within English. The department has identified ways in which its procedures can be more creative such as making better use of team teaching, lead lectures and working with other departments. In classrooms, there is a clear emphasis on giving students opportunities to work independently and to exercise their own initiative. The department is moving away from conventional approaches to homework and making use of broader, "home learning" and thematic approaches. Some of the teaching and learning observed was creative; teachers are not afraid to take risks in planning lessons since relationships with students are very strong. Teachers have discussed the place of creativity in English, using the Personal Learning and Thinking Skills programme and other initiatives to review provision. Links with other subjects and extended English days are also under consideration.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving the promotion and monitoring of students' wider, independent reading.

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