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Dear Dr Docherty

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 08-09 December 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 good.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English are broadly average overall. Students' achievement is good.

- Standards are broadly in line with average on entry to the school although the changing intake includes increasing numbers of students with weaknesses in literacy. Students make very good progress to reach standards that are slightly above average at the end of Key Stage 4.
- Both CVA and other performance data confirm that achievement is equally good across both Key Stages 3 and 4 and that this reflects a steady upward trend. The APS scores of students on GCSE courses have fluctuated in recent years. However, the number of students

achieving grades A*-C in English is above average. Results in English Literature were also above average in 2008.

- Consistently very good progress is made by the different groups of students in the school. For example, boys achieve in line with girls in English, in contrast with the national trend. Students from minority ethnic groups also do well.
- Achievement is not as strong in the sixth form. Results in A2 courses are better than AS. Achievement in the English Language and Literature course was outstanding in 2008 although results have varied in recent years. Achievement in the English Literature course has been broadly satisfactory over recent years.
- Progress in lessons observed was good but varied in line with the quality of the teaching. However, students are positive about work and keen to do well. This also contributes to their overall good achievement.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning of English is good.

- Relationships are very strong and students speak highly of their English teachers. They enjoy lessons and respond positively to teachers who mostly make learning "fun". Key Stage 3 students felt that the course had helped them to make progress and gain in confidence. Older students valued the support and extra assistance provided by teachers although they would like more variety in some lessons.
- Lessons observed varied in quality but were good overall. Teachers managed classes well and students responded with interest. The most effective lessons were lively with a good range of activities that kept students motivated. Information and communication technology (ICT) was well used in a few lessons and this helped students develop their writing and research skills. Teachers' subject knowledge is secure and some of the teaching observed was enthusiastic and made good use of topics that related well to students' own interests and experience.
- Although all teachers used learning objectives, their impact varied across lessons and some were not clear enough in driving forward the learning. In a few lessons, opportunities were missed to build on what students already knew or to encourage them to work independently.
- The quality of marking is good, with some outstanding practice. The best marking is very detailed and gives students clear feedback on ways of improving their work. Some marking was less effective at identifying strengths and weaknesses and this, together with inconsistency in using curricular targets across the department, meant that some students were not clear enough about their next steps in learning.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is good.

- The curriculum is effective at engaging students' interests, encouraging enjoyment and enabling them to make good progress.
- Students have a good range of choice with GCSE courses available in English, English Literature and drama at GCSE, as well as an adult literacy qualification. Both English Literature and a combined Language/Literature are taught in the sixth form.
- There are detailed schemes of work across both Key Stages 3 and 4, including some innovative units such as the Library/Literacy unit and Forming a Band. Students especially enjoy the drama work and the department is planning to extend the focus on speaking and listening at Key Stage 3. The Key Stage 3 scheme includes a balanced range of units although planning for progression is less clear where a topic such as poetry is not studied in the same depth each year.
- The department has planned effectively for changes to the English curriculum and this is likely to include more cross curricular work.
- Provision for enrichment, including extra curricular activities, is satisfactory. Some students would like more opportunities to be involved in theatre and other visits.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are good.

- The departmental leadership is thoughtful, reflective and open to change. This is reflected in consistently high achievement by many students and an improving trend in results. There is clear direction to the work of the team.
- Delegation within the department is effective and all teachers contribute well to developments. There is a good sense of team work, shown in the effective collaboration over writing and revising schemes of work.
- Good support is supplied by the senior leadership team and there are plans to extend this work. The department's self-evaluation is effective and identifies clearly strengths in the subject as well as areas for further improvement.
- The department draws on the usual range of evidence in monitoring its effectiveness including feedback from students and work sampling. However, this is relatively unstructured and opportunities are currently missed to provide more challenging feedback on teaching and learning.

Creativity in English

The department views creativity as being at the centre of work in English although there has not yet been any formal discussion of how creativity might be promoted more systematically. The emphasis at present is on providing variety within the subject, with opportunities for drama, speaking and listening and increasing emphasis on students working independently. ICT is seen as a way of extending possibilities for students. Some of the lessons observed showed teachers being creative in their approaches and students showed good ability to think for themselves and to work collaboratively. Teachers in other departments are also developing more creative approaches to the curriculum, for example through the use of activities that focus directly on improving students' thinking skills.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising achievement in sixth form courses to the level currently seen across Key Stages 3 and 4
- developing a more systematic approach to subject monitoring and evaluation.

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