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Mrs C Bailey
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Bailey

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 05-06 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 eight lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is good. Standards are below average.

- Many students enter with very low levels of literacy and attainment in English; nevertheless they make good progress in speaking, reading and writing.
- By the end of Key Stage 3, good progress has been made, even though levels attained are well below those expected of 14 year olds. Boys make better progress in Key Stage 3 than Key Stage 4 but still lag behind the girls.
- By the end of Key Stage 4 the attainment of boys and girls is below national average, but the proportion obtaining a good pass at grade C or above in GCSE English represents good progress from when they started at King Ethelbert. The gap between the standards attained by

girls and by boys widens in this examination to a greater degree than nationally.

- More students obtain a good pass in English Literature, but again results are well below average. In 2008 the proportion obtaining grade C or above in English was very similar to the previous year, but a higher proportion of students made good progress from their starting point.
- Students respond very well to the steps the school takes to improve their English skills. Their written work shows care being taken to be correct in spelling, grammar and punctuation. Diligence is shown by students with very weak skills, as well as the more able.
- Some students find independent reading very difficult but are usually willing to try. Students speak and listen well when working in small groups. They can answer questions or address the class with confidence, but in this respect boys make a noticeably stronger, more frequent contribution than girls. Older students are willing to explore ideas in depth, for instance about how the author portrays different characters in "Lord of the Flies".
- The positive impact of English on students' personal development, and thus on their learning, continues to be a remarkable feature, as was highlighted in the previous whole-school inspection report. Students like, respect and trust teachers. As one girl said, "We have a great bond with the teachers and this helps us learn."

Quality of teaching and learning of English

Teaching and learning are good.

- Lessons observed were good overall, whilst some outstanding and some satisfactory lessons were also seen. The department has consistent expectations that usually work well to support classroom practices.
- In good lessons, students are remarkably engaged in their learning. The department embraces creative approaches. Visual resources, including computers and interactive whiteboards, and note-taking frameworks are often used to gain students' interest. Students say lessons are often active and lively and they like learning that way.
- Lessons are planned to a standard format which often leads to good teaching, but in a few lessons the task planned fails to match the clearly stated objective, so students do not fully reach the desired outcome. Also, in less successful lessons, the skills of English being practised are not emphasised enough to be clear to students.
- Teaching, often well supported by classroom assistants, meets the needs of low ability students particularly well and there is no doubt that all students get plenty of encouragement. However in Years 7 to 9, there is sometimes scope for more challenge to higher ability students.

- Marking by teachers is regular and fairly informative and all students have guides to levels in their books. However, it is evident from talking to them that some students do not grasp as well as others where they are in terms of English skills and what they need to do to advance to a higher level. Often students think of targets only in terms of improving presentation or accuracy, rather than deeper levels of skills, expression and understanding.
- The department is conscious that an unfortunate sequence of staff illness has affected continuity and progress for several classes and some students feel this has held them back, though they acknowledge that efforts are made to minimise disruption.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is good.

- The school has commenced an innovative link with the local selective grammar school to assist in raising standards in English and mathematics. Year 10 students attend an intensive session of learning activities and are supported by mentors from Year 12. Those involved have found the sessions stimulating and value the advice of the peer mentors. It is too early to say what impact this will have on standards, but it has contributed to students' motivation and confidence.
- English is one of three lead subjects within the school's recently awarded specialist status for visual arts. Media Studies GCSE has replaced English Literature for all upper band Year 10 students as a GCSE course. The intention is to engage greater interest and better develop literacy. By developing the uptake of media studies, teachers hope to inspire boys in particular to be more committed to expressing themselves in writing. There are signs that this approach is having an impact.
- The department made a commitment last year to increase opportunities for learning outside school and each year group has an entitlement to a visit to a cultural event.
- The department makes a good contribution to meeting students' needs as learners and citizens. Some novels studied in Key Stage 3 have themes related to health and to safe behaviour and students are encouraged to relate them to their own life experience. Equal opportunities and global issues come up in discussions and in the study of poems from other cultures in Key Stage 4. In lessons students work as teams, making positive contributions and using communication skills which will contribute to their future employability. For example, an interesting unit of work involves discussions about proposals to regenerate areas of Margate that have declined since the heyday of the English seaside holiday.
- The school has piloted an "Opening Minds" curriculum for some Year 7-8 students. On the whole, this way of working engages students well in a commendable amount of thinking, discussion, team work and

writing. However there is not always enough emphasis on making explicit the English skills that are being developed, alongside the more general personal, learning and thinking skills.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are good.

- The subject leader is hard working and self-challenging. She is determined to move beyond present success with students who make good progress from low levels, to increasing higher level achievement, as demonstrated by willingness to innovate in the curriculum.
- Good use is made of the school's excellent tracking data to ensure that vulnerable students, such as children in care or with learning difficulties and disabilities, are making good progress. Regular monitoring of lessons and written work is carried out and evaluation is largely accurate, although more could be done to improve some lesson planning and to ensure that the target setting approach is getting through to all students.
- The school system makes robust demands on middle leaders to provide regular reviews and action plans, alongside senior management reviews. Reports for English are perceptive and actions selected are appropriate; for example, actions to improve boys' achievement are being implemented well. Inconsistency in students' awareness of targets has been detected, but not yet fully tackled. Good plans are in place to collaborate with mathematics in targeting students capable of gaining five or more good GCSE passes in order to raise achievement to meet the National Challenge target.

Creativity in English

Creativity has long been established in classroom practice as a way of motivating students who have difficulties in reading and writing. Visual resources, including Information and Communication Technology, are used as a way into the work and thoughtful pairings of students likely to benefit from working together are arranged. Teachers are confident about taking varied approaches, or challenging students to think in unusual ways because they are confident that their good relationships will mean that control is not lost. It is evident, for example in the sustained and varied projects presented in Year 11 work about regeneration in Margate, that students are confident to take their work in original and individual directions. There is evidence of other subjects adopting creative approaches that involve English skills, for example in science a girl had written a murder mystery, having learned about forensic science. The department has sought to develop a programme of visits to creative arts events for each year group, as well as inviting performers of poetry, drama and stories into school.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that students understand how to improve their work in order to reach targets set
- improving the clarity of the subject skills being developed within lessons and the levels of performance expected.

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

Tony Byrne
Additional Inspector