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Dear Ms Stonier

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 02-03 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 and students' work and the observation of five lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English are broadly average. Achievement is satisfactory.

- Achievement is satisfactory across the school, but slower at Key Stage 3 than it is at Key Stage 4, with comparatively few students gaining the higher Levels 6 and 7 at Year 9. In lessons, all ability groups made similar rates of progress. Most students have positive attitudes to English and these have a valuable influence on students' achievement.
- Attainment in English is broadly average on entry to Year 7. Having made satisfactory progress overall, students reach average standards at Year 11. GCSE results are strongest in English Literature, with above average percentages gaining A* to C grades. The proportion gaining A* to C grades in English Language is broadly average. Girls do not do

as well as other students in the English Language GCSE, and the school relates this trend to disaffection among some female students. Specific attention has been given to those girls at risk of underachievement, but this support has not yet proved to be fully effective.

- Test and examination data for 2007 and 2008 have alerted the school to a fall in performance in English, which it is keen to arrest. In particular, this information indicates a slowing in progress in the last two years from previously good levels. Current improvements to the curriculum, assessment and monitoring are starting to have an impact, but have yet to be fully embedded.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory.

- Teaching observed was variable in quality but broadly satisfactory overall.
- Typically, good relationships create a relaxed atmosphere where more able students in particular feel able to offer spontaneous comment. Opportunities for debate in small groups are frequent and popular with students. Practical activities, such as role play, and the chance to research information enhance students' knowledge and understanding, as well as their enjoyment of literature, including poetry. Students are mostly attentive and get on with their tasks, sometimes with much focused concentration.
- Where teaching is good, students are clear about what they have to do. Timely prompts keep them on track and questioning encourages them to explain in greater detail. However, too often there are missed opportunities to challenge pupils to the full, thus constraining progress to its current satisfactory level. Importantly, abstract and complex ideas are not always explored in enough depth to prepare students for subsequent tasks. Where such weaknesses are most in evidence, teaching fails to engage students, leading to low-level disruption.
- Students express general satisfaction with the academic guidance they receive in English. Those at Key Stage 3 like the chance to evaluate their own achievement, although their progress booklets are not always in evidence during lessons. The school is well aware of inconsistencies in the quality of marking. At Key Stage 4, feedback is detailed with clearly identified areas for improvement. Marking is more variable at Key Stage 3, where comment is sometimes too brief.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is satisfactory.

- The school has already started to increase the flexibility, range and interest of the curriculum by creating links between English and other

subjects. Nevertheless, it is still early days and the school recognises that there is scope for more development. Students, for example, would like much greater use of information and communication technology.

- Enjoyment and interest is also stimulated by texts and resources that are topical and relevant. This content offers the potential for much challenge, which is not always fully exploited in lessons.
- Students in the newly-formed Year 12 are pleased with the A level curriculum. They feel the small size of the group allows teaching and learning to move on at a swift pace.
- Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or difficulties is adequate. Those in need of support are identified quickly at Year 7. The small proportion of students at the highest levels of need receive help outside lessons, and the school has been careful to ensure that their work in other subjects is not disadvantaged by this withdrawal. These activities match the topics being covered in the main English lesson. The majority receive support in lessons, sometimes from a teaching assistant. However, lesson activities are not always varied enough to meet the needs of these students.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management of English are satisfactory.

- Senior and subject leaders are anxious to improve performance in English and reinstate earlier good levels of progress.
- A review of provision and performance has been undertaken jointly by senior staff and the subject leader. They are well aware of the issues and what must be done. The department's action plan and priorities place appropriate emphasis on standards and achievement, although targets are not yet broken down into small realistic steps of improvement in order to sharpen the school's focus and direction and evaluate improvement closely.
- Improvements to assessment mean that staff can now track students' progress more closely, although department staff are not yet fully involved in the detailed analysis of data completed at senior leadership level.
- Leaders are exploring ways in which they can spread the good classroom practice already taking place within the department. Regular checks on teaching have been undertaken by senior staff and the curriculum leader, and students' work has also been monitored. Observational prompts usefully focus on the quality and extent of students' engagement and learning, but evaluative comments about the quality of teaching do not yet always do the same.

Creativity in English

Creativity within English is at any early stage of development, although it is growing through the development of cross-curricular links. Where drama is used in lessons, students perform readily and enthusiastically and listen with appreciation to each other. There are some valuable opportunities for discussion and debate, including participation in local competitions, but limited opportunities overall for students to see theatrical performances in connection with their studies, or benefit from visiting authors and poets.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- accelerating progress at Key Stage 3
- ensuring that all students are fully challenged during lessons, especially so that abstract and complex themes are explored in depth
- improving the consistency of teaching across the department.

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

Patricia Davies
Additional Inspector