

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr N Pattinson
Headteacher
Armthorpe School
Mere Lane
Armthorpe
Doncaster
South Yorkshire
DN3 2DA

Dear Mr Pattinson

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 13-14 January 2009 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 six lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be satisfactory but improving.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English are below average overall. Students' achievement is satisfactory.

- Standards on entry to the school are below average in English especially in relation to performance at the higher Level 5. Standards remain below average at the end of Key Stage 4 in English Language. In the sixth form, nearly all students achieve pass grades in English courses but the proportion gaining the higher levels is again below average.
- Standards in the past have been affected by substantial staffing turbulence. The more settled situation currently is reflected in

improved results at the end of Key Stage 3 in 2008 and results in GCSE English Literature last year that were in line with the national average.

- Achievement is satisfactory across all key stages including the sixth form. The school is aware that boys do less well than girls in English and that some of the lower attaining students should achieve better.
- Progress was good in the lessons observed reflecting improvements in the consistency of teaching. Students behaved well and were keen to learn. Opportunities to explain their views and to work collaboratively in groups have a positive impact on their self confidence.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning of English is good.

- The quality of teaching is currently good. This reflects improvements in staffing and the consistency of teaching across the department. This improvement led to better results last year at Key Stage 3 and in GCSE English Literature.
- English is popular with students. This is shown in their positive attitudes in lessons and a good take-up of courses in the sixth form. Students speak very highly of their English teachers. They praise high levels of care and guidance and they enjoy the variety in lessons.
- Lesson observations confirmed that relationships between teachers and students are very strong. Teachers manage classes well and have high expectations of behaviour. Learning objectives are clear and well chosen; this provides good direction and structure to the learning. Students are engaged by a good range of active approaches, including regular opportunities for discussion and pair work. Students are helped to reflect on their work through pair and self-review as well as the explicit sharing of assessment criteria.
- Lessons observed tended to be over-planned. This meant that too much of the lesson was teacher-directed with too little time for students to work independently or to demonstrate what they had learnt. The scrutiny of students' work suggested that some students, especially the lower attaining, were given too few opportunities for extended writing with too much time spent on shorter language exercises.
- Assessment in English is good. In addition to the regular use by teachers of clear learning objectives and student self review, all students are set effective curricular targets. Despite this good practice, some students remain unclear about how to improve their work. This partly reflects variability in the quality of marking including the use of teacher comments to reinforce the curricular targets.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is satisfactory.

- The school provides a good range of courses in English and related studies at both GCSE and sixth form level. It also enters nearly all students for English Literature at GCSE.
- The current English curriculum is successful at engaging and enthusing students. It is not yet as effective in ensuring that all students make good progress as they move through the school, particularly at Key Stage 3.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is clear and well planned around six core units each year. However, there is no systematic approach to promoting wider independent reading at present and there are too few opportunities for the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in English. The approach to media work tends to focus on analysis rather than the production of media texts. The department is currently reviewing its Key Stage 3 scheme. It has already developed a new Year 7 unit that focuses more directly on developing students' independent learning. This provides a good opportunity for the department to review the whole Key Stage 3 programme to ensure that it builds in sufficient pace, breadth and progression.
- Assessment is integrated well into schemes of work, supported by the developing use of approaches from the Assessing Students' Progress initiative.
- The department offers a good range of enrichment activities including theatre visits, work with writers in school, developing links with other departments, and extra help for students with exam preparation.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are good.

- The department is well led. The subject leader is a good classroom practitioner and enjoys the respect of students and other teachers. She has worked hard to maintain standards over a challenging period. She is committed to further improvement and has clear ideas about what needs to be done.
- The departmental team is now strong. There is a good level of consistency of approach and quality across the team. Teachers work well together, for instance in re-writing schemes of work. The capacity for further improvement is good.
- School self-evaluation is good in English. The school uses performance data well to review achievement and has a clear understanding of strengths and weaknesses. Students' progress is tracked systematically to identify areas of concern.

- There is a coherent and systematic approach to monitoring and evaluation. The school makes use of a wide range of evidence to evaluate progress in English and the senior leadership team monitors developments closely and provides good support. Lesson observation forms are detailed but focus at present on teaching rather than the impact on learning and students' progress.
- The department is aware of areas of weakness and what needs to be done although action plans lack success criteria and tend to make too little direct reference to the impact of activities on outcomes for students.

Creativity in English

The department is seeking to enhance students' creativity through changes to its scheme of work at Key Stage 3, particularly opportunities for students to work independently. There are also some good developing links with other subjects as a result of the specialist arts status of the school and its involvement in the Creative Partnerships programme. Enrichment activities in English currently make a good contribution to students' creativity. Lessons give students many opportunities to express their own views and to make decisions in small groups although the writing programme for some students lacks creativity at present. The department has responded imaginatively to the issue of boys' under-achievement in English through piloting a boys' only group in Year 9.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising achievement in English especially for boys and for lower attaining students
- giving students more opportunity in lessons to work independently and to demonstrate what they know and can do
- improving students' confidence as writers and their opportunities to produce extended writing.

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