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Mr T Wootton
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Dear Mr Wootton

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 23-24 February 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 eleven lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is satisfactory and standards are average.

- Students enter the school with above average standards in reading and writing. Generally, standards attained in tests at the end of Year 9 have been better than average. In GCSE English, students' overall attainment has been in line with the national average.
- The school's drive to raise standards is having an increasingly positive effect. In 2008, a focus on improving coursework resulted in 70% of students in Year 11 attaining grade C or higher in English, which is above the national average. Performance in English Literature and drama was similar in this respect. However, some groups of students, including boys, did not achieve as well as others, and the proportion of students attaining A* or A grades was average.

- Achievement has been broadly satisfactory overall over recent years. Efforts to overcome obstacles to good achievement have become more strategic and effective in the current year. As a result, the progress being made by students in Key Stages 3 and 4 is now improving rapidly.
- This is reflected in the good quality of many students' work and contributions to lessons, and in the department's careful tracking which shows accelerating and generally good progress by students across the age range.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

Teaching and learning have improved and are currently good.

- Teaching seen during the inspection was generally good and sometimes outstanding.
- Strengths observed include good use of simple learning objectives which help students to understand and evaluate particular skills.
- Teachers used varied resources – including smartboards and dramatic scenarios - in imaginative ways which prompted students to think independently and increased their confidence in speaking and listening.
- In lessons that were satisfactory, activities were not well enough planned to ensure that the full range of students made good progress towards the objectives.
- In the best lessons seen, teachers' planning built very effectively on good knowledge of what the full range of students in the class could already do. Teachers anticipated obstacles to progress and adapted activities to suit. They provided high challenge and good opportunities for independent learning. As a result, students' work was individual, creative and reached the objectives set. In such lessons, students' attitudes to learning were very good.
- Marking, and students' self assessment, usually follows clear criteria and recognises specific achievements. Guidance is increasingly effective, although students are sometimes unclear about the next steps to improve their skills. Older students really like the practice established in some classrooms of individual discussions with their teacher about how to improve.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is good.

- Nearly all students in Key Stage 4 are entered for GCSE in English and English Literature. They have the further option of taking drama and media studies is also being introduced.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum offers good breadth, including drama. It has been reshaped this year to focus on key skills, giving teachers more freedom to decide how these will be learned. This is a work in

progress but, where embedded, is working well. There is a growing emphasis on realistic contexts: for example, a Year 8 class is writing a book of short stories which will be placed in local doctors' waiting rooms. Students' preferences and teachers' expertise are influencing content. Particularly in Year 7, where new schemes are best established, these developments are contributing to better progress across classes.

- A "buddy" scheme linking English teachers with colleagues in other subjects has led to collaborative planning for learning about, for example, the historical context of the film "The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas" and poetry from the First World War.
- Students have good opportunities to get involved in high quality performance, as their production of "Masquerade" in a local theatre vividly illustrated. A recent well-targeted enrichment day has had a positive response from Year 11 students.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are good.

- The new head of English, appointed in September, has moved the subject forward significantly, with good support from the senior leadership team and the local authority.
- His well-informed vision and passion for the subject have given it a strong identity in students' eyes and he is inspiring new confidence in the department. Colleagues work together to develop new schemes of work, using their good range of expertise, and say they have been supported to learn new skills and take creative risks. Examples of exciting teaching are shared in every department meeting.
- Self-evaluation is accurate in identifying areas of weaker performance and has led to a relevant plan for improvement. Performance targets and professional development are aligned well with specific goals.
- Regular, moderated assessment, work scrutiny, spot checks on students' understanding of what they are learning, and consultation with students are all used to discover what is working well. Where necessary, interventions follow swiftly and are monitored closely.
- All this has improved consistency in assessment and is improving teachers' effectiveness in promoting good progress.
- While these changes have only begun to have impact on examination results, students' progress, work and attitudes clearly indicate improvement.

Creativity in English

Creativity is at the heart of the vision for English and is embedded in new programmes of study. The emphasis on skills is freeing teachers to be creative and take risks, producing some exciting lessons. Realistic contexts for speaking and listening stimulate independent learning: the quality of

collaborative talk in a Year 7 class, for example, was impressive. A Year 10 lesson expertly illustrated how to avoid spoon-feeding an interpretation of poetry, by leading groups of students into open-ended, exploratory discussion. This led to individual and insightful writing about how the poet had communicated to them. Students are beginning to use new technology to communicate, for example, through recording podcasts conveying their response to a poem or presenting their research in audio visual form. These approaches are working well for both boys and girls.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising overall achievement by ensuring sustained good progress by all groups of students
- developing further teachers' confidence in planning to ensure different students meet the learning objectives, and in helping students to understand how to develop their skills.

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 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

Susan Bowles
Her Majesty's Inspector