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Mrs J Bernard  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Bernard

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 and students' work and the observation of seven lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English are well above average. Achievement is good.

- Standards have been consistently high in English at the end of Year 9. At the end of Key Stage 4 standards have been significantly above average in the last three years, with an increase in 2008. Predictions for the current Years 10 and 11 suggest that this improvement is being sustained. The school does well with its higher-attaining students. High standards are readily evident in students' fluent writing and perceptive comment and analysis.
- The proportion of students gaining A\*-C was significantly above average in 2008, and included results of students who took English Literature early in Year 10. The results of this Year 10 group show a strong level of performance, including at A\*-A. Nevertheless, some

students felt that higher grades might have been gained if they had taken the exam in Year 11.

- Good achievement owes much to a flexible and exciting curriculum and high levels of motivation from students. Some make extremely rapid gains in their learning, but overall achievement is not yet outstanding because progress is too mixed. Variation in progress relates to inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and also to a lack of sharp focus in self-evaluation.
- The school is keen to extend the scope of opportunities available to its students at Key Stage 4, particularly the more able. To this end, it also provides the Advanced level English course (AS) at Year 11 to selected students. Last year's group did well. Students currently doing the AS course feel this work is broadening and enhancing their language and literacy skills.
- Those very few students learning to speak English as an additional language make similar progress to other students. So, also, do those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD).

### Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- The overall picture of good teaching and learning is consistently enhanced by students' considerable application and interest. Technology and media are used to particularly good effect to stimulate attention and ideas, sometimes to a highly reflective level. While older students identify the quality of relationships and communication as key strengths of teaching, all age groups agree that it is the use of imaginative teaching strategies that make lessons enjoyable and fun.
- Lively and energetic delivery is a feature of almost every lesson observed, so that teaching moves at a brisk pace. Where teaching is particularly successful, students' ideas are explored in depth before moving on, thus ensuring that they are thoroughly prepared for the demands of subsequent tasks.
- However, teaching does not always make full use of the interest generated by exciting techniques. Sometimes, in lessons observed, the teacher rushed on too quickly to the next task. Even within well-taught sessions, discussion becomes overly dominated by staff, so that students' thoughts are not always given enough attention. Sometimes, too few questions are directed at girls or those who remain silent.
- Students speak with much appreciation about the academic guidance they receive. In particular, they feel members of staff are always ready to provide individual help. They also identify the ease of access to work online as a means of clarifying what they need to do if stuck. Students know their learning targets, having negotiated them with staff. They also benefit from good quality written feedback.

- Expectations of progress are realistically high. Nevertheless, the school is well aware that assessment requires further refinement, especially in relation to setting National Curriculum targets.

## Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is good.

- Students benefit from an already well-planned, stimulating and challenging curriculum, which is still evolving. Every opportunity is taken to use the curriculum's flexibility and to make learning relevant to students' experience. Cross-curricular links and the promotion of learning skills are developing well and the use of information and communication technology (ICT) is particularly strong. The benefits of social skills promoted through the school's sports programme are illustrated in the extremely strong working partnerships among students.
- The school is eager to broaden the opportunities available to students at Key Stage 4. However, the chance to take some courses early has placed pressure on the time available for English and the school is investigating how this can be resolved. While students recognise the benefits of these innovations, they say that they would like the chance to discuss their participation in advance.
- While keen to push on the more able, the school is also committed to providing all its students with the functional skills necessary to future well-being. Wider inclusion of the lowest-attaining students across teaching groups helped to lift the GCSE results of these students last year.
- Provision for gifted and talented students provides a wide range of enrichment activities, including theatre workshops, public speaking, links with the local newspaper and radio station and web-site design.

## Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management of English are good.

- Senior staff are very keen to push the boundaries of academic performance. To this end, the school has built a strong team of enthusiastic and committed specialist staff. This has been a crucial step forward. Curriculum development is moving briskly, expectations are high and staff are not afraid to take risks. They have fully embraced the use of technology and media, using it successfully to motivate and challenge.
- Staff have been deployed carefully to where strengths are best placed and students speak highly of their teachers. Where students are consulted about the effectiveness of the department, they feel they have made a difference. Student representatives attend departmental meetings and act as mentors to improve teaching.

- Monitoring activities are appropriate. Consequently, leaders have a secure view of the quality of teaching, although the school has yet to fully eradicate inconsistencies in the quality of teaching.
- Improvements to assessment also provide staff with a valuable broad understanding of academic achievement. Nevertheless, the department's self-evaluation is not yet sharp enough to give all it the information it needs about the full impact of its work and to plan in detail for the future. For example, it has yet to take a closely focused look at the effectiveness of innovation at Key Stage 4.

### Creativity in English

Students are quick to praise the imaginative and varied curriculum. ICT and media are integral to the department's work and seen as a vital component of learning. Recordings and film clips, for example, simulate first-hand experience. The vast majority of students in Years 7 and 8 have their own notebook computer, increasing their independence. Students use them as a natural adjunct to learning, although some express the view that they would like to complete their work in handwriting more often than they do at present. Students also have access to lesson and homework content through the school's website and can use this to complete or check on work in and out of school.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving the consistency of teaching in order to accelerate students' achievement to a high level
- sharpening the quality of self-evaluation so that the department has a more detailed understanding of the impact of its initiatives, particularly at Key Stage 4.

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 and 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