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Mr S Smith
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Dear Mr Smith

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 eight lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English are very high. Students' achievement is outstanding.

- Standards are consistently well above average at the end of Key Stages 3 and 4. Results improved further in 2008 with greater numbers of students achieving the highest grades, especially in GCSE English Literature. Standards across the English courses in the sixth form are above average.
- Achievement is outstanding across Key Stages 3 and 4. Performance in two of the past three years placed the school in the top 10% nationally. Students have tended to do better across Key Stage 4 than Key Stage 3. However, action taken by the department resulted in

significantly improved standards and achievement at the end of Key Stage 3 in 2008.

- Although girls do better than boys in English Language GCSE, the gap is much less than the national average. In fact, evidence shows that boys achieve better than girls overall at GCSE and this is the reverse of the national picture. All other groups of students achieve equally well although the department is currently monitoring the progress of students who enter the school with below average standards in English. The most able students are fully challenged by teaching that sets very high expectations.
- The English department provides four different courses at A level in the sixth form. Overall, students achieve well across these courses although performance in English Literature is not as strong as the others.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning of English is outstanding.

- The excellent progress made by students confirms the consistently high quality of teaching across the department. Students also speak very highly of their English teachers. They praise their enthusiasm, commitment, approachability and the high quality of care. As a result, students are very keen to do well and extremely positive about the subject.
- Lessons observed were consistently good in quality, with some aspects that were outstanding. Strengths of lessons included: good use of key questions that provided clear direction to learning; lively and engaging activities; very strong relationships; good strategies for self and peer assessment; and good subject knowledge leading to high expectations of students' progress. In the best lessons, teachers provided open ended tasks that gave students greater responsibility for their own learning.
- Students are especially well prepared for their GCSE examinations since a significant number of teachers in the department are current examiners. As a result, they are very clear about assessment criteria and what to do to improve their grades.
- Lessons observed were all conducted at a good pace. At times, this led to activities that were a little rushed and did not give enough time for students to explore tasks sufficiently.
- The quality of feedback provided to students through marking is consistently high. Students are also helped by the regular setting of individual targets by teachers across reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is outstanding.

- The curriculum leads to very high standards in English as well as promoting students' enjoyment.
- The school provides a very good range of courses in English and related studies at A level. It also enters nearly all students for English Literature at GCSE.
- The curriculum is broad and well balanced. It builds well on the wide range of expertise within the department. For instance, drama and media work are both well integrated within English at all key stages. Assessment is built carefully into schemes of work and this is well used to track the progress of individual students.
- The department is currently re-writing its Key Stage 3 scheme of work. This is already proving popular with students in Year 7. The new units are very well planned and include some innovative ideas. The units also provide for good cross-curricular links and help to develop students' broader thinking and learning skills well.
- The curriculum is enhanced by a good range of enrichment activities. This includes regular visits to the theatre, lectures for older students at regional universities, participation in competitions, and clubs such as the creative writing club and a film club. In addition, there are very good links with the Learning Resource Centre (LRC). All students have library skills lessons in the LRC and the LRC makes a very good contribution to students' literacy through a reading club, the Reading Champions scheme, and support for special events such as World Book day.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are outstanding.

- The department is very well led. The newly appointed subject leader and the assistant headteacher (and previous head of department) both act as very good role models through the quality of their teaching and their high level of commitment. Well supported by other teachers, including key post holders in the department, this has led to a thoughtful and imaginative approach to the subject and a good sense of shared purpose.
- Expectations are high and all planning is directly focused on improving outcomes for students. Despite already high standards, there is no complacency and the department has identified areas where achievement can be improved.
- The department contains a well balanced and consistently strong team. This gives it a very good capacity for further improvement.

- Self-evaluation is accurate and identifies strengths and weaknesses well. The department makes good use of evidence from work sampling and lesson observation. Students are especially well involved in giving feedback about English, through their own occasional lesson observations and opportunities to discuss the English curriculum.
- The school uses performance data very well to review achievement and students' progress is tracked systematically to identify areas of concern. This leads to well focused support, where needed.

Creativity in English

The school provides a creative experience for students in English which leads to high standards and succeeds in motivating them well. Several of the lessons observed included innovative aspects that provided open ended challenges for students or otherwise encouraged them to think for themselves. The subject leader is clear about the notion of creativity in English and is seeking to enhance it through the new schemes of work in Key Stage 3. This includes, for example, giving students opportunities to choose their own assessment piece at the end of units of work. She also encourages teachers to be original in their approaches and use of resources.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving the consistency of achievement across the English courses in the sixth form.

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