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Mr A Stringer
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Stringer

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 25-26 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 nine lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Standards are below average. Achievement is good.

- Attainment on entry to the school is below average. A few students have high attainment but a significant number of boys have low levels of literacy skills.
- Despite good efforts by the school, major staffing difficulties in the English department contributed to standards at Key Stage 3 in 2008 that were just below average at Level 5+ and below average at Key Stage 4.
- The staffing issues have now been resolved. Students now make good progress from good provision and effective specialist teaching, and they are well on course to meet appropriately challenging targets.
- Students with English as an additional language and those with learning difficulties generally achieve as well as their peers.

- Standards of speaking and listening are good. Students listen critically to their teachers and to others and speak clearly and fluently, although too few offer extended justification for their responses.
- Good use of information and communication technology (ICT) for the presentation of work results in completion to a high standard.
- English makes a good contribution to the personal development of students such as through good opportunities for collaboration, expressing personal views in lessons, presentations to a range of audiences, public speaking and enrichment activities.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Some teaching observed was outstanding.
- Lessons are planned well. Objectives and outcomes are clear and executed successfully through carefully structured and challenging sequences to learning, good differentiation, a variety of purposeful and well-paced activities and a strong focus on independent application.
- Teachers have secure subject knowledge. Good explanations and questioning extend learning. Creative teaching, a good range of strategies, good provision for speaking and listening, very well chosen resources and some very good use of ICT, build interest and enthusiasm, motivate students to achieve and secure good progress. Teaching assistants and library staff contribute significantly to learning.
- High expectations and good relationships between teachers and students, and students themselves, are highly conducive to learning.
- Students enjoy English. They have good attitudes, behave well and are eager to participate.
- Assessment informs planning well and underachievement is tackled promptly so that students do not lose ground. Accurate teacher assessment, careful and supportive marking and good opportunities to evaluate learning contribute strongly to achievement, although students do not always act independently on targets from marked work.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The English curriculum is broad, balanced, meets the needs, interests and capabilities of students well and takes good account of improving basic skills. Well chosen texts and other materials provide good opportunities to examine cultural, topical and controversial issues. Good quality homework tasks and good provision for enrichment activities link well to learning in classrooms. Reading is promoted strongly and less fluent readers are supported well by volunteers. Work on display provides good models for writing.

- Provision is informed by the views of students very well.
- New and creative schemes of work are developing well, although at an early stage, with further developments planned. Speaking and listening, ICT, drama and media work make a strong and significant contribution as do units of work linked to the school's specialist sports status and the Somme unit in Year 9 developed with history.
- Students are prepared well for tests and examinations and action to develop non-GCSE literacy courses at Key Stage 4 address the needs of a very small number of lower attaining students well.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are good.

- The department is forward-looking, innovative and reflective. It is strongly led and working very hard and successfully to regain ground following recent staffing difficulties. The capacity for further improvement is outstanding.
- There is a clear sense of direction for English, clear policies and procedures, a good understanding of strengths and weaknesses, strong teamwork and resolute commitment to improve standards. Comprehensive and accurate self-evaluation and good analysis and use of performance information inform planning for improvement and result in well targeted interventions and good gains in learning.
- Monitoring and evaluation of provision and tracking of students' progress are rigorous and assessment informs progression very well.
- Professional development is targeted to priorities and includes support from the authority's literacy consultant at Key Stage 3.
- Inclusion is good. Students' needs are known well, the progress of the lowest attaining students is tracked carefully and a good range of targeted interventions improves low literacy skills. Tailored support for individuals contributes to improved standards of coursework at Key Stage 4.
- Plans are in hand for a more systematic approach to developing cross-curricular literacy skills.

Creativity in English

- Creativity is becoming embedded increasingly strongly in the English curriculum and lessons take good account of learning styles. Students have good opportunities for collaborative work and to explore texts in creative ways, such as from 'mood boards'.
- New units of work linked to sport in particular demonstrate creative approaches to learning that stimulate and motivate students to achieve challenging targets.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising standards at Key Stages 3 and 4
- continuing to develop new schemes of work
- implementing a more systematic approach to cross-curricular literacy 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 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

Rosemary Matthews
Her Majesty's Inspector