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Mr J Maddox
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Dear Mr Maddox

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 16-17 March 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 seven lessons. Sixth form students were engaged in examinations at the time of the visit and, therefore, this letter focuses on provision in Years 7 to 11. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in English is outstanding. Standards at Key Stages 3 and 4 are exceptionally and consistently high.

- In 2008, all Year 11 students achieved at least grade C in GCSE English and English Literature. Around two thirds achieved grade A* or A in English and English Literature. This was the school's best set of results for some years.
- Almost all students achieve Level 6 in tests at the end of Year 9 and, in 2007, the last set of published results, two thirds achieved Level 7.

- Students have consistently made outstanding progress between Year 7 and Year 9. In 2008, Year 11 students made outstanding progress from their high starting points and reached their challenging targets.
- Boys perform well compared to girls in relation to the national gender gap in achievement.
- In the lessons observed, students made at least good progress. They enjoyed their learning, settled to work immediately and collaborated well. They engaged in sophisticated discussion and, when asked, could reflect on each other's views and explanations. They responded very well to activities which challenged them to think carefully and to apply their knowledge.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching is outstanding overall.

- Teachers' subject knowledge is very good and used effectively to assist students' learning. Lesson planning is thorough and objectives are precise and challenging.
- In the best lessons, students are engaged by rapid pace and excellent variety of activities, including drama, paired and group work. Teachers use questioning very effectively to develop students' thinking and to encourage debate. Students are encouraged to understand how they have learnt so that they can apply these approaches in future tasks.
- In some lessons, although teaching is well organised, less variety, challenge and pace allows learning to slow.
- Assessment systems are very thorough and teachers use both generic and task-specific success criteria. Students appreciated the publication of these criteria in their 'profile booklets' but some felt they could use them more when they were preparing and completing assessment tasks.
- Teachers' marking is related to objectives and their comments help students to know what to do to improve in their work. These comments are recorded as targets after each assessed piece of work.
- Although there was some effective use of data projectors in lessons to stimulate students' response, overall, the use of computer technology is limited by access to facilities of a kind that would allow more use in lessons of information and communication technology (ICT) by all students.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is outstanding.

- There is a broad range of topics which meet the National Curriculum requirements and are sufficiently challenging to match students' needs.

- The Year 7 curriculum has been reviewed to match the new English framework and there are increasing links with drama, the performing arts and other subjects.
- There is an excellent range of events, activities, trips and visitors which enhance and enrich the curriculum, especially in reading. This demonstrates the growing impact of the school's specialist performing arts status.
- Students mostly enjoy English, value the variety of activities and the opportunity to express their views and opinions.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management of the subject are outstanding.

- The subject leader has a very detailed understanding of the department's strengths and areas for development. He sets a clear and ambitious vision for the subject and uses teachers' individual strengths well, encouraging effective team work and sharing of expertise.
- The subject leader monitors provision thoroughly and analyses performance to identify aspects where improvement is needed. Self-evaluation is accurate and development plans are well-focused.
- The department is open to review and change, exploring adjustments to the curriculum and different approaches to the grouping of students.
- A targeted focus on aspects of examination preparation and teaching has led to improving results, especially in Key Stage 4.

Creativity in English

There is an excellent range of events and extra-curricular activities which extend and develop students' skills and experience, with particular success in debating and public speaking. The concerted programme to raise the status of reading and to promote a reading culture throughout the school and in families is energetically led and highly successful.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- reviewing and extending the curriculum, especially the use of ICT and multi media approaches.

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

Martin Cragg
Her Majesty's Inspector