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Mr P Birch
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Dear Mr Birch

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 17-18 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 eight lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Standards are above average and achievement is good.

- Students enter the school with broadly average standards although a substantial minority have higher prior attainment.
- Virtually all students pass GCSE in English and English literature, and the proportion achieving the higher grades is above average. Last year, a significant percentage attained an A or A* grade in English literature. Students' average score in English is consistently above the national level and is climbing faster than the national rate.
- Students' rate of progress has improved and is generally good. However, challenging targets for the end of Key Stage 3 have not yet been met.

- Boys, especially those with middle and lower prior attainment, have achieved less well than girls, although the gap is narrowing.
- Students' attitudes to the subject are generally positive, especially in Key Stage 4. They appreciate how teachers make lessons interesting and help them make progress, but would welcome more opportunities to be independent and creative.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

Teaching and learning are good.

- The quality of lessons which were observed was varied, but overall good.
- Strengths seen consistently in lessons included the use of varied and purposeful activities, good relationships and well-managed behaviour. Teachers used good resources well. This included regular use of interactive whiteboards to present information, although the potential of new technology to help learning was not fully exploited.
- The good or outstanding lessons seen demonstrated strong pace and challenge. Students achieved challenging objectives because teachers built on their strengths, targeted activities precisely at their needs and involved them well in assessment. Among the effective approaches used were modelling, hands-on tasks and purposeful pair work, crystal clear explanations and explicit feedback. By carefully listening, teachers succeeded in probing and developing students' understanding and drew from them fully explained views.
- Lessons which were less successful did not use assessment as effectively to challenge students and help them overcome predictable difficulties. Plans tended to focus on activities, and students were less clear about how to achieve the learning objectives. The use of time, especially in plenary reviews, was less effective.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum is good.

- The department has taken advantage of reduced content and prescription in Key Stage 3 to revise schemes of work, emphasising active and independent learning and using the team's special strengths to engage students' interest. Teachers have created interesting schemes of work, some reflecting English in the twenty-first century, and these are being shared and adapted productively.
- English and English literature courses are followed by all students in Key Stage 4. Drama is fairly widely incorporated into lessons and available as an examination option outside the department.
- Older students particularly appreciate the opportunities for topical discussion, research and independent writing which teachers

sometimes incorporate. Enrichments in the form of theatre workshops and competitions are offered within school to maximise participation.

- Taking a strategic view of differences in group performance, the department has purchased some new texts which appeal more strongly to boys. For the past two months finer setting and single sex top sets in Year 9 have been trialled. Initial indications are that these have improved attitudes and progress.
- Other interventions include literacy support in Key Stage 3 and additional English lessons to prepare borderline students for examinations. Those observed were well planned and their impact is carefully monitored and positive.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management of English are good.

- The senior leadership team works very well with the subject leader so that areas where achievement has been satisfactory rather than good are clearly recognised. This has led to clear priorities.
- Monitoring and evaluation of the subject are effective. Following the rigorous model set by the senior team, the subject leader regularly reviews the quality of teaching and assessment, drawing on a good range of evidence.
- The school provides relevant in-house training and coaching – to which two subject leaders contribute – and this has improved the skills of the team.
- In a year which has brought new members to the team, the subject leaders have maintained good team work and innovation, for example, in piloting new forms of assessment and adjusting the English curriculum and teaching approaches to better meet the needs and interests of students. A mid-year dip in some students' progress was quickly identified and amended.
- Changes have had a positive effect on students' attitudes and outcomes. Achievement, especially for abler students in Key Stage 4, has steadily improved, and more recently the gap between boys' and girls' achievement has narrowed.
- Leaders realise there is further to go if the department is to realise its high ambitions. In particular, feedback to staff needs a rigorous focus on students' learning and progress in the subject.

Creativity in English

Particularly in Key Stage 3, English lessons regularly include opportunities for speaking and listening, drama and creative writing. Sometimes students perform their work, take part in drama workshops or meet professional writers. Students say that English lessons often "get you out of your seat" to learn actively, and they enjoy group work. Some older students regret that

there are fewer opportunities to be creative rather than analytical in Key Stage 4, but they value the chances teachers provide.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- consolidating better achievement by ensuring teachers' plans are tailored to the capabilities of their students
- checking that learning objectives help students understand how to do well.

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

Susan Bowles
Her Majesty's Inspector