

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



23 April 2009

Mr J Turner
Headteacher
Friern Barnet School
Hemington Avenue
Friern Barnet
London
N11 3LS

Dear Mr Turner

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English and mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Gill Close HMI on 10-11 March 2009 to look at work in English and mathematics.

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 themes of creativity in English and the effectiveness of the school's approaches to improving the quality of teaching and learning in mathematics. 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 six lessons in English and parts of ten lessons in mathematics.

English

The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in English is good. Standards are slightly above average overall.

- Standards on entry to the school are close to, but slightly below, national average. However, there is a substantial gap between reading and writing standards and increasing numbers of students have joined the school in the last two years with below average attainment in writing.

- Key Stage 3 results have improved substantially over recent years and the unvalidated results for 2008 were amongst the school's best for English. The department had targeted the performance of more able students and this was effective with a good rise in the numbers of students achieving Level 6+.
- GCSE results in English have been slightly above average over the past two years. This reflects good progress by students, especially given the above average mobility in the school and large numbers of students for whom English is a second language (ESL). There was also an increase in the number of students achieving A/A* in 2008. The department enters most students for English literature and results are broadly in line with English language. The department performs well in comparison with other subjects in the school.
- The contextual value added data confirms that students make good progress across Key Stages 2-4. Boys do particularly well and this is in contrast with the national picture. No particular group of students under-performs and some groups, including some students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and some English as an additional language (EAL) students, do especially well.
- English makes a good contribution to students' personal development as they are encouraged to work together in groups and there are many opportunities for discussion and the exchange of ideas.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning of English is good.

- Although teaching and learning are good overall, lessons observed varied in quality. There is some outstanding teaching within the department which can be used to disseminate good practice.
- Students spoke very highly of their English teachers. They enjoy English lessons and believe that the teachers care for them and provide a good variety of activities that help them to learn. Some students described English lessons as "creative", others spoke of the good mixture of "fun and learning" and one student described the "special bond" forged by her teacher with students.
- Strengths of lessons observed included: strong relationships and good classroom management; the use of a varied range of interactive approaches; effective modelling of writing by teachers; innovative ways into texts; and very good support by classroom assistants.
- In some observed lessons, there was too much emphasis on the teaching activities rather than learning outcomes for students. This meant that teachers moved on from activities too quickly and before learning had been secured. There was also a tendency in some classes for teachers to dominate discussion and so limit the length and quality of students' comments.
- In discussion, some students were unsure about ways of improving their work. The best marking in English is very detailed and explains

clearly what students need to do next. However, the quality of marking is variable and there is no clear approach at present to setting students' curricular targets in English.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is good.

- The curriculum in English engages all students well, including boys. It enables students to make good progress overall. This is because students learn in English through lively and interactive approaches.
- The Key Stage 3 scheme of work is in the process of revision. The plan provides for a good range of units that build in progression and pace. There are some potentially innovative units such as Creative Learning through Film and Urban Legends. Planning at this stage is thorough and effective in identifying links with other subjects and implementing key concepts from the revised National Curriculum for English. Assessment is fully integrated throughout the course. There is a good emphasis on responding to and analysing moving image texts. At present, there is too little systematic emphasis on promoting wider reading and opportunities to develop information and communication technology (ICT) skills in English are limited.
- The Key Stage 4 curriculum is well planned. Students appreciate the clear structure, explicit assessment criteria and opportunities for extra support. Most students follow courses in both English language and English literature; a course in adult literacy is also provided for all students.
- The English department works very effectively with learning support teachers. There is good quality joint planning and this enables classroom assistants to be well integrated within lessons and to provide good, targeted support for individual students. Teaching assistants are also given opportunities to lead particular parts of lessons. English teachers have a good knowledge of the particular needs and targets of students with learning difficulties.
- The school provides a good range of enrichment activities in English. English teachers commit considerable time to providing out-of-school support for examination classes through revision and catch-up sessions. There is good support for able students through a weekly reading club and other specific activities, such as a visit to the Guardian newspaper.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management in English are good.

- The subject leader is an effective classroom practitioner, well respected by students, who models good practice well. She receives good

support from other key members of the department and the team works well together with a clear sense of shared purpose.

- The department works particularly closely with the Learning Support team. It has improving systems for tracking students' progress. This leads to a well managed intervention programme, taught by support assistants, which is closely targeted at identified weaknesses, especially in reading, and aims to supplement the mainstream course in English.
- The school's self-evaluation in English is secure. The department analyses test and examination results closely and uses this well to identify changes in teaching or the curriculum. This leads to effective subject planning that is firmly based on improving standards. The plan is very clear in identifying the appropriate actions needed although the strategies for developing teaching are less explicit
- Inclusion is a very strong feature of the department's work. All students feel equally valued.
- The school has clear procedures for monitoring the progress of subjects, including regular reviews and a direct departmental link to the senior leadership team.

Creativity in English

The department has given creativity enhanced importance within the new units of work at Key Stage 3. Much current teaching makes good use of creative approaches to students' learning although some teaching observed tended to limit their opportunities for independent work. The department has been involved in a project with the British Film Institute to develop moving image work and this is having positive impact on students' engagement. It also runs a film club. The school is developing cross curricular initiatives in Key Stage 3 including a Year 7 transition project focused on the theme of community. Older students spoke with enthusiasm about a recent visit by a drama group that helped them to explore poetry.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- focusing more directly on students' learning in lesson plans
- developing students' understanding of how to improve their work through more consistent marking and curricular target setting.

Mathematics

The overall effectiveness of mathematics was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in mathematics is satisfactory. Standards are below average.

- Students join the school with attainment that is below average although the extent of this varies between year groups. By the end of Key Stage 4, they reach below average standards. In recent years, students' progress during Key Stage 4 has been below average and it fell in 2008 to being inadequate. The school has put in place measures that have improved the progress of current students to satisfactory. The Year 11 cohort is on track to reach higher standards, although still below average, but a substantial number of students are not achieving as well as they should. Year 10 students are doing better than them.
- In 2007, students made good progress during Key Stage 3. From their low starting points, they reached below average standards in national tests. The unvalidated results for 2008 show that standards have risen to closer to the national average, and progress has improved; it is good.
- Students behave well and apply themselves to the work set. They enjoy their mathematics lessons, especially the practical nature of some Key Stage 3 work.

Quality of teaching and learning of mathematics

The quality of teaching and learning of mathematics is satisfactory.

- Many lessons are good, and some are outstanding, but there is too much inconsistency across classes for all students to benefit from good teaching and make good progress. Some teaching is satisfactory, and there are occasions when lessons are inadequate. The department's continuing emphasis on increasing the interactivity in lessons has already led to improvements.
- Where teaching is strong, students are keenly involved in problem-solving activity that helps to build their understanding. Concepts are introduced well, for example using the interactive whiteboard. Students work in groups and develop their reasoning through discussion. Teachers have good subject knowledge and use it to plan well-structured activities. They ask good questions to probe understanding and listen carefully to students' responses, identifying where they have misconceptions and helping to overcome them. Teaching assistants are well briefed and give students good access to the work.
- Where teaching is less strong, teachers spend too long talking and giving the students methods and notes to copy, without focusing on understanding why methods work or giving students enough time to think for themselves. Activities are not matched well enough to each student's needs and individuals are not clear what they need to do to meet the learning objectives. Teachers do not monitor carefully where students are stuck or find the work too easy.
- Constructive marking and use of targets are infrequent, although there are some examples of marking that gives students additional activities to help them improve. Students do some homework that is assessed online, but too much work in their books is incomplete or unmarked for them to know how well they are doing.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is satisfactory.

- The Year 7 scheme of work is a strength. It gives students good opportunities for cross-curricular work and to use and apply mathematics in solving problems. The Key Stage 4 curriculum is based closely on a textbook. Staff are building up a central store of supplementary activities, but there is no guidance for teachers to ensure that a conceptual approach is used when topics are introduced.
- Students regularly do homework online but they have little hands-on use of computers across the breadth of the mathematics curriculum. They benefit from taking part in mathematics demonstrations and votes on the interactive whiteboard, but the quality of these varies across classes.
- High attaining students complete Key Stage 3 in Year 8 and commence the GCSE course early in Year 9, achieving high standards. They also take part in mathematics challenges.
- At Key Stage 4, provision is broadening for lower attaining students and those at risk of gaining no mathematics qualification, for example through giving them the opportunity to prepare for online numeracy tests. There is room for more coherence in how this is provided, to focus the subject specific support that students need.
- Students welcome the revision sessions and support for examinations that teachers provide. A CD-ROM for revision is sold to students, but not all have bought it.

Leadership and management of mathematics

The leadership and management of mathematics are satisfactory.

- In the year and a half since the head of department joined the school, there have been many improvements during a time of staffing instability. Leaders have taken the good step of appointing a potential advanced skills teacher (AST) this year to add capacity and support new teachers. Staff have a new resource area that supports collaborative working. They work together well, sharing responsibilities, ideas and a clear desire to raise standards. The teaching area has stimulating mathematical displays.
- Subject specialists evaluate lessons accurately and identify useful areas for development that are helping teaching to improve. Nevertheless, the head of department is not involved enough in monitoring to raise the quality more rapidly across the department.
- The head of department knows well the strengths, weaknesses and key areas for development. The departmental improvement plan includes some appropriate actions to address these, but is insufficiently focused to drive improvement or set clear measurable targets for each year that all staff can work towards. It is not linked closely enough to the self evaluation, which misses opportunities to make judgements.

- This year, the school has improved its system for recording and tracking students' progress so that underachievement, such as not making two levels of progress during a key stage, can be detected sooner. It has correctly identified the need to improve the accuracy of the assessments that are entered into this system.

Subject issue: the effectiveness of the school's approaches to improving the quality of teaching and learning in mathematics

- Choosing to appoint a potential AST has provided the capacity and support to move a beginning teacher forward. Open and honest sharing of ideas, with a willingness to try out new things, has also helped other teachers to improve and take on a more interactive style.
- The form for recording lesson observations has useful sections for teacher action points. These are helpfully gathered in a summary which informs well the school's central professional development programme, but there is room for more systematic links to individuals' professional development.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising progress and standards at Key Stage 4
- structuring improvements in teaching through monitoring and support to increase students' understanding, challenge and involvement, and the use in lessons of targets matched to students' need and the assessment of their work
- developing the schemes of work to ensure all students' entitlement to conceptual introductions, using and applying mathematics, and using ICT across the mathematics curriculum
- increasing the accuracy of assessment
- prioritising in improvement planning the key areas for development and their success criteria so staff can work together effectively to achieve them.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop English and mathematics 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