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Ms C Robinson
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Robinson

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 18-19 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 ten lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good with outstanding features.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is good. Standards are below average.

- Attainment on entry to the school is well below average. A high proportion of students have learning difficulties, many are early learners of English as an additional language and levels of transience are above average.
- From very low starting points, students make good progress overall. By the end of Key Stage 4, the progress made by a significant number of students with multiple learning needs is outstanding.
- In 2008, results at Key Stage 3, although below average, showed a steadily improving trend. Key Stage 4 results also showed significant improvement, although remaining below average.

- Standards of speaking and listening are average. As a result of good provision, students are gaining considerable confidence in offering extended responses in lessons although some are challenged by sustained listening.
- For some students, standards of handwriting and presentation in class books are poor. Work on display in some classrooms celebrates achievement well, but shows variation in quality.
- English makes a particularly strong contribution to the personal development of students through opportunities for speaking and listening, collaboration and in seeking their views to improve provision.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- A significant amount of teaching observed was outstanding.
- Planning for lessons is good. Clear objectives and outcomes are executed successfully through purposeful, challenging and well-paced activities. Teachers have high expectations. They have good subject knowledge and use explanations and questioning to good effect to extend and probe learning.
- Well structured sequences to learning, creative teaching, a very strong focus on speaking and listening and a wide variety of teaching and learning strategies interest and engage sometimes difficult and reluctant students. Good opportunities for pair and group work and very well chosen resources, including information and communication technology (ICT), also support learning.
- Students have a wide range of learning needs that are known and supported well, including through the explicit teaching of key literacy skills. Independence is promoted well, although a few students are slow to engage in learning independently and some lack the confidence to do so.
- Very good relationships between teachers and students and students themselves, and sensitive management of unwanted behaviour create and maintain good conditions for learning. Support staff make a good contribution to students' progress.
- Students enjoy English, behave well and have positive attitudes to learning. They recognise increased challenge in learning tasks and value the support offered to them by their teachers. However, they identify pockets of low-level disturbance interrupting learning in some classes.
- Assessment, including peer assessment, is informing planning and progress towards targets well, and underachievement is identified and supported promptly.
- Careful and supportive marking and verbal feedback against individual targets contributes to good gains in learning. Some marking is of outstanding quality.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The English curriculum is broad, balanced, meets the needs and interests of students well, takes good account of improving low levels of literacy skills, and secures progression. Media work makes a strong and significant contribution as do provision for cultural diversity and enrichment activities.
- Some features of the curriculum are outstanding. Opportunities for creativity and collaboration, interesting approaches to speaking and listening, and an internet package for managing students' learning at Key Stage 4, have energised teachers and resulted in new ways of learning. Independent reading receives less emphasis.
- New and creative schemes of work are developing well in Year 9. Further developments are planned to embed formative assessment.
- Accreditation at Key Stage 4 takes good account of the needs of students and has improved motivation.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are good.

- A strong and hardworking team show resolute determination to raise standards further. Outstanding features in the leadership and management of English include exemplary strategic direction, clear policies and procedures, an entirely accurate understanding of strengths and weaknesses, comprehensive action planning and excellent capacity for further improvement. Professional development is aligned closely to priorities and includes good support from the local authority.
- Procedures for monitoring and evaluating provision and students' progress include excellent whole-school procedures, termly review, good account of students' views that influence curriculum development and regular standardisation and moderation to secure consistency in marking and assessment.
- Inclusion is outstanding. Students' learning needs are known very well, their progress is tracked systematically against individual targets and underachievement is addressed promptly. Well targeted support addresses low levels of literacy skills. Performance data are analysed very carefully, inform planning for improvement and result in a range of well considered interventions, including provision for higher attaining students.
- Plans are in hand for a systematic approach to cross-curricular literacy skills led by the English department.

Creativity in English

- Creativity is embedded in schemes of work and in the planning and delivery of lessons. Creative and interesting teaching meets the very diverse needs of boys well, motivates them to achieve and contributes significantly to their good progress.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising standards at Key Stages 3 and 4
- utilising expertise in the English department to develop a systematic approach to cross-curricular literacy skills to further raise achievement across the school
- improving the presentation of students' work and the quality of display in some classrooms.

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