

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

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



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Mrs A Cullum
Headteacher
Heathside School
Brooklands Lane
Weybridge
Surrey
KT13 8UZ

Dear Mrs Cullum

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 21-22 January 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 outstanding.

Achievement and standards in English

Achievement is outstanding and standards are well above average by the end of Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form.

- The proportion of students reaching at least expected standards at the end of Year 9 has been very high for some time. Following developments in the curriculum and teaching, the proportion gaining the higher levels has increased significantly.
- GCSE English Language and Literature results have been consistently well above average.
- Whilst girls achieve most A* grades, boys match their performance in grades A*-C and exceed the average for their gender by an even greater extent than girls.

- At A level higher grade passes (A/B) exceed the national average. The department has reviewed and adjusted its approach to support even better achievement.
- Standards were above average in lessons seen. Reading was confident and speaking and listening well above average. Progress over time in written work is outstanding.
- Students' attitude to English is highly positive. They are enthused by teachers' passion for the subject and feel very well supported on an individual basis. They have pride in the progress they make. This contributes to high levels of achievement.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

Teaching and learning are outstanding.

- Students are highly engaged in their learning.
- Teachers make very effective use of assessment data to group students within classes to secure the best level of challenge and consequent progress.
- There is very good variation and balance of activity between whole class and group work to sustain interest and promote independent learning.
- Challenging work is undertaken in gradual steps so that students' confidence and competence steadily build.
- There is exemplary use of National Strategy assessment criteria in marking and in lessons to guide students so that they have a clear understanding of how to further improve their writing. Teachers insist on the use of specialist language that will gain credit in examinations.
- Students in both Year 9 and Year 11 described how their teachers help them prepare thoroughly for speaking and listening assessments so that they are very confident when addressing their class.
- Occasionally, in lessons observed, teachers spent too long on build-up activity and then had to rush the main learning activity.

Quality of curriculum in English

The curriculum is outstanding.

- There is a wide-ranging, well-organised curriculum in English based on texts which are challenging and were described as "gripping" by both male and female Year 11 students as they looked back across their school career.
- Assessment is fully integrated in the units of work and consistently applied to support progress, particularly in writing.
- There is regular use of additional lessons to improve those students whom the very good tracking system identifies as performing below potential.

- Students are very carefully assessed and their progress tracked so that they are placed in appropriate sets to meet their learning needs and changes are arranged at regular review points.
- The school has introduced schemes of work that are challenging for high ability students and also meet the needs of a special group of students with literacy difficulties.
- Changes have been made to sixth form teaching sequences and syllabus to support still higher achievement.
- Extra-curricular activities were somewhat restricted by staffing pressures last term and the time for additional lessons, but students have done well in debating competitions and Year 10 students share an interesting partnership project annually with Year 6 students in a nearby primary school.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are outstanding.

- High expectations within the subject area have fuelled the drive to raise standards. Management action anticipated an issue raised in the previous inspection about improving achievement through assessment and effectiveness was demonstrated in the following summer's results.
- Planning, target setting, tracking and grouping are all very well managed to meet the needs of students and take account of the vision for whole school development.
- Teaching is thoroughly monitored and assessment of students' work is moderated regularly. Student surveys and post-examination analysis are conducted and schemes of work adjusted as a result.
- Accountability is well established. There is a very good link with senior management in use of data and analysis of results and effective follow up on issues arising.
- Assessment practice reflects very good absorption of latest subject developments at national level.

Creativity in English

The department takes a particularly creative approach in developing students' skills and confidence in speaking and listening. Students in Year 9 and Year 11 identified this as a favourite aspect of their learning and one in which they are progressing very well. They said that each assignment was approached with opportunities for thinking, research, sharing and developing in small groups prior to presenting to whole class. This builds confidence and enhances performance. It was notable how readily students in Year 12 and Year 13 were able to offer opinions and challenge each other in creative ways

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- teachers being consistent in devoting enough time to the main learning activity in lessons.

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

Tony Byrne
Additional Inspector