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Mr G Walker  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Walker

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 24-25 February 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 pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of nine lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Standards are above average and achievement is good.

- Attainment on entry in English is broadly average. Standards at the end of Year 9 are above average as reflected in the National Curriculum tests. Students make good progress and achieve well. There is an improving trend in overall achievement because an increasing proportion of students make two levels of progress. There is little difference in the achievement of boys and girls in these tests.
- All students are entered for English Language GCSE and almost all for English Literature. Standards are above average in both examinations. All students gained a grade in English Literature in 2008 and almost all in English Language. There is a rising trend in attainment in English at GCSE. Historically students have made only satisfactory progress from Year 9 to Year 11 but this has improved in recent years.

- Historical data indicates that girls do not achieve as well as boys although both groups perform above the national average. In lessons, there was little evidence of underachievement by girls although it was noticeable that boys were more ready in upper sets to volunteer answers and display their knowledge.
- Students with learning difficulties make good progress. The school has a number of bilingual students who make slightly better progress overall than students whose first language is English. Students at an earlier stage of competence in English make good progress.
- English is a high performing subject in the sixth form. Standards in the English Language and English Literature courses are consistently above average.
- The subject makes an excellent contribution to students' overall personal development. Students clearly enjoy English and many, particularly in the higher sets, respond well to the academic demands so that their behaviour creates an ethos of high achievement. Students have very mature and inclusive social attitudes.

### Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning of English is good.

- The department is composed of skilled teachers whose key strength is their ability to engage students so that they want to gain high standards and enjoy that achievement.
- Teachers are confident, have very good subject knowledge and awareness of the demands of the examinations, know the students and enjoy working with them. As a result there is a positive ethos in lessons which provides students with the security to volunteer ideas.
- Teachers listen particularly well, valuing students' contribution.
- Teachers' obvious enthusiasm ensures that students make good progress. Classroom routines and expectations are well-established. Teachers are particularly adept at managing behaviour in a positive and neutral way and anticipating difficulties.
- The English team is large and has a high proportion of part-time staff. There are currently limited opportunities outside the formal performance management arrangements for staff to observe other staff teaching in order for teachers to see other approaches and share the evident good individual practice within the department.
- Teachers share learning objectives with the students. In some lessons observed, these were very specific and sometimes differentiated. Consequently the teacher had a very precise view of what was to be achieved in the lesson and had identified the key steps in the learning needed to attain the goal. In these lessons, the challenge for students and the checks on their progress, the transition and sequence of often small steps from one activity to another, were particularly effective.
- Students across the school were very clear that the feedback they received in the subject helped them improve. They knew their targets, and understood the level and grade criteria for their examination work.

## Quality of curriculum

The quality of the English curriculum is good.

- The English curriculum provides a rich range of experiences and promotes students' enjoyment and good overall achievement. Students use information and communication technology (ICT) within some lessons and access to ICT for course-work is good.
- The curriculum includes detailed analysis of film and other media work. There is a balanced programme, which includes opportunities to study drama, poetry and novels. Reading is promoted well, particularly in Year 7, and students across the year groups were keen to read for pleasure.
- The department has introduced or modified units of work for Year 7 in the light of the new curriculum and is planning to review their effectiveness later in the year.
- Students appreciated that units of work were planned and sequenced well and older students felt that the work in class supported their course work effectively.
- Additional investment is well used in staffing to allow for flexible interventions and support for students.

## Leadership and management of English

The leadership and management of English are good.

- Excellent leadership by the head of department has led to higher standards and better achievement. Close co-operation with the school's senior leaders, and the restructuring of the department with clear delegation of leadership and management roles, has resulted in significant improvements to the English provision, although the full impact of these has still to work through. The change in the GCSE syllabus and the formative nature of the coursework has led to improvement in standards. In Key Stage 3 units of work have been refocused and made more rigorous.
- The school now has detailed systems to track students' progress and these are being used effectively to identify students who are in danger of slipping behind. The intervention provision afforded through the flexibility in staffing is being used effectively to boost progress. Targets are challenging. There is thorough evaluation of external data.
- The department has a clear sense of direction derived from the fact that self-evaluation is extremely accurate. Consequently, it has identified clear priorities in an effective development plan and there is a strong sense of momentum in the department's development. There is a strong sense of teamwork and mutual support across the department.

## Creativity in English

Students report that their enjoyment of English stems, to a very large degree from the opportunities that they have to express their own points of view and to share these either in discussion or through their writing. Younger students enjoy the opportunities for creative writing and older students wish that there were more opportunities for that within the syllabus. The department is very aware of the importance of threading creative opportunities into the Key Stage 3 curriculum. Real audiences, for instance through the link with the local bookshop, and the use of the students' virtual learning environment to post students pod-casts of revision notes, are used particularly effectively.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- monitoring girls' performance carefully and using targeted questions to ensure that their views enhance class discussions
- ensuring that learning objectives are precise and teachers are very clear what they want students to gain from specific sessions
- extending opportunities to share good practice throughout the department.

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

Rod Passant  
Additional Inspector