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Mr M Jones
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Dear Mr Jones

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 29-30 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 eight lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good. It is particularly effective at Key Stage 4.

Achievement and standards

Standards are above average and achievement is good.

- Many students, especially boys, make excellent progress in English during their time in school. A large majority of students attain above average standards. For these students, this represents outstanding achievement.
- Students make good progress in Key Stage 3 and attain broadly average standards in the Key Stage 3 national tests. In 2008, standards in reading were below those in writing.
- Standards at GCSE show a rising trend. In 2008, nearly three quarters of the year group gained A* to C grade in English.
- Girls make good progress. Single sex grouping in the top parallel sets allows staff to boost effectively students' inherent low academic

confidence and self-esteem. Students who find learning difficult make good progress because of the support they receive.

- The department has focused on Key Stage 4 developments and adopted highly effective 'catch up' activities and practical teaching approaches to improve English standards at Key Stage 4. Less time has been spent on embedding these approaches into the Key Stage 3 curriculum.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning of English across the school is good overall.

- The consistent very high quality teaching at Key Stage 4 is a key factor that enables students to make such good progress.
- Lessons are carefully constructed and sequenced to ensure that students have the skills to complete coursework successfully. There is high quality dialogue in the form of comments or detailed marking between teachers and students about their work. Tasks set are meaningful, demand students' active participation and are often given additional 'zest' by ensuring that the student's contribution is subject to peer scrutiny, adding additional motivation.
- With older students, the teaching approaches demand a commitment from them to become active partners and take responsibility for their learning. Staff provide very significant support in the form of regular additional classes after school and periodic weekend revision classes demonstrating their commitment to students' success. This builds the quality of relationship and students' high attendance in revision classes reflects their positive attitudes.
- At Key Stage 3, students do not see themselves as partners in the learning and are therefore more reliant on the teachers.
- Teachers are very knowledgeable about the subject as well as the examination structure. Teachers make effective use of information and communication technology (ICT) both as a hook to catch students' interest and to develop their knowledge and skills.
- In Key Stage 4, teachers give students very clear guidance on how to improve their work to attain a higher grade and this helps fuel students' motivation and sense of personal responsibility. At Key Stage 3, students receive less specific guidance about their performance although the marking often does give points for general improvement.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the English curriculum is good.

- The GCSE course is highly effective in supporting the outstanding achievement of many students at Key Stage 4. Its modular nature and periodic assessment throughout the two years allows flexibility and a

degree of personalisation is possible according to students' relative strengths.

- Many of the units require extensive use of ICT and it is in the department's ready access to this where the impact of the specialist nature of the college is most evident. There have been trips to the theatre and some use of live performance in school but in the main, enrichment lies in the school's provision of additional support and revision classes.
- The department is currently reviewing and adapting the Key Stage 3 curriculum. The department is aware that the current curriculum insufficiently supports the improvement of students' reading skills. Whilst the English department has a major part to play in this, developing literacy skills is a whole-school concern particularly when so many students join the school with low reading ages.

Leadership and management of English

The leadership and management of English are good.

- The deputy headteacher has provided outstanding leadership in supporting the department and, along with the senior leadership team, making key strategic decisions.
- The school's self-evaluation of the department is accurate. The way staff have adopted the pilot GCSE, coupled with the work in developing teacher effectiveness, has been extremely effective in raising standards in English.
- There is very close tracking of students' progress at Key Stage 4 as they progress through the units. This allows for a degree of personalisation but also identifies early those students who for one reason or another are slipping behind.
- The plans for raising achievement focus on individual students and detail the strategies, what needs to be done and what support to give.
- The acting head of department has only just taken up post but has identified a clear action plan and is aware of the need to share good practice across the department. Given the ongoing support of the deputy headteacher, there is good leadership potential and capacity within the department to move forward as a department.
- The department works hard to ensure that students who are disaffected, refusers and those on alternative placements are set work regularly so that they keep in touch with the course and keep their options open.

Creativity in English

The GCSE course provides students with good opportunities to demonstrate their imagination and creativity. For example, in the spoken English studies unit, students wrote sensitive and perceptive monologues based on characters from 'Blue Remembered Hills'.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that the Key Stage 3 curriculum and teaching approaches help younger students to take more responsibility as partners in their learning in English
- reviewing the structure of the English course at Key Stage 3 in order to support more effectively the development of students' reading skills.

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 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

Roderick Passant
Additional Inspector