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23 April 2009

Mr J Keller
Principal
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Dear Mr Keller

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 12—13 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 pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of eight 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 to the school is broadly average.
- Standards are just above average at the end of Key Stage 4 in the proportion gaining A* to C grades in English Language, although the proportion gaining the highest grades was below average in 2008. The department is adding value in that students do better than Key Stage 3 scores predict in the grade range B-C.
- The proportion of students gaining A* to C grades in English Literature is securely above average. Attainment is improving in both English examinations. Historically students have made broadly satisfactory progress from Year 9 to Year 11 but this is improving.
- Students made consistently good progress in lessons. Students with learning difficulties made good progress because of the targeted support in small groups.

- Girls do better than boys in English Language, although there is little difference in English Literature. This difference in performance is not evident in lessons.
- In the sixth form, just under half the group gained A to B grades at advanced level in 2008, close to the national average. At AS level, almost all students gained a pass and there was little difference between predicted and actual grades. Overall, in the sixth form students achieve well in relation to their starting points.
- The subject makes a particularly good contribution to students' overall personal development. They like the subject, feel well supported and there is strong mutual respect between teachers and students. In many lessons, there is an extremely productive ethos of high achievement. Whilst students often show high levels of motivation in lessons when supported by teachers, they lack independent learning skills.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning of English is good.

- Teachers are enthusiastic and confident because they have good subject knowledge and awareness of the demands of the examinations. They are skilled practitioners and manage classrooms well.
- A key feature across all classes is the warm relationships between staff and students. Teachers know the students well. Lesson planning is detailed and uses the college lesson-planning template identifying the learning objectives and success criteria at three levels. Although students made good progress in lessons observed they did not always see themselves as partners in the learning and sometimes let the teacher do all the work.
- In the best lessons, teachers had a precise view of learning aims, the necessary steps needed to reach the objective, and the differing level of challenge to meet the wide range of ability within the groups. In these lessons, students took greater responsibility for their learning and were actively engaged at a higher level. In these lessons, tasks set for lessons and homework assignments were meaningful, the audience carefully defined and students' motivation evident in the work they produced outside the lesson.
- Students feel well supported by the department. They talked about staff's willingness to give up their time. They liked the fact that they could e-mail draft work. The English department provides very extensive formal and informal care and support for individual students. Students felt that they had good feedback and knew how to improve their work. However, there is a mismatch between teacher assessment and final grades.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the English curriculum is good.

- The examination syllabi provide a balanced range of experience, particularly as the majority of students take examinations in both English Language and Literature in Years 10 and 11.
- Teachers adopt creative approaches to ensure that they bring texts alive. Some texts are long established features of the syllabus yet the teaching is fresh and individual teachers have developed a range of resources and expertise in the way that they tackle them. Students report that they have good access to information and communication technology (ICT).
- The department is beginning to make use of the college's virtual learning environment. The college's specialism in the performing arts provides a backdrop of creative endeavour and participation, which supports the English department's work and approach. Students appreciated that the department was well organised and units of work structured and sequenced. They saw the overlap of some texts between drama and English as useful.

Leadership and management of English

The leadership and management of English are good.

- The head of department is leading the department well and the impact of her work is seen in improved results although the impact of some initiatives has still to work through. There is detailed analysis of data and very clear priorities reflected in the department improvement plan. She has an accurate view regarding the quality of teaching. The department is now using individual student performance data effectively to target students who need additional help.
- There is high morale and staff are mutually supportive. The department is beginning to foster a more corporate approach. There is a momentum for improvement. Leadership and management responsibilities are effectively divided between the head of department and the second in the department. There are a limited number of departmental meetings.

Creativity in English

Students report that their enjoyment of English stems from the opportunities that they have to express their own points of view and to share these either in discussion or through their writing. The head of department reported that the teachers' workshop by the Royal Shakespeare Company on approaches to teaching Shakespeare and teachers' subsequent use of suggested creative strategies in lessons was particularly useful and along with Theatre visits contributed to improved standards.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that students capable of high attainment are suitably challenged
- developing students' independent learning skills from their induction in Year 10 onwards.

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 and 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

Roderick Passant
Additional Inspector