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Mr J Goodchild  
Headteacher  
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Downs Road  
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Dear Mr Goodchild

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 16-17 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 seven lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Standards are average and achievement is satisfactory.

- Attainment on entry in English is below average. Historically standards at the end of Year 9 are just below average. Standards fell slightly in 2008 but the school has identified issues relating to the marking of the Shakespeare paper. Currently students make satisfactory progress in lessons at Key Stage 3. Students' achievement is broadly satisfactory in relation to their starting points. Students in the upper sets make good progress.
- Standards show a declining trend in GCSE English Language. In 2008, they dipped significantly and were exceptionally low. Overall, these students' achievement in English over their time in school was inadequate. The school enters a higher proportion of students for English Literature than seen nationally. The proportion gaining A\* to C

grades was well below the national average. Almost all students gained a grade in both examinations. The proportion gaining A\* -A grades was well below average in both examinations.

- A number of factors in combination explain the low standards in the 2008 examinations. The department has experienced significant staffing problems in recent years and particularly during the two years of these students' GCSE course. Whilst staff recruitment remains an acute problem, the department is now stable. There had been long-standing issues relating to the 2008 Year 11 cohort evidenced in the tracking of exclusion data during their time in school. The year group performed poorly across all subjects at GCSE.
- Currently students in Year 10 and 11 are making satisfactory progress. Student tracking data indicates that Year 11 are currently on target to attain about 50 per cent A\* to C grades. Although below the national average, this would represent satisfactory progress from their starting point. The early return of a module of assessed work for their examination indicates that 53 per cent gained A\* to C.
- Overall, students in the sixth form achieve well in relation to their starting points. In the A2 examination, although numbers are relatively small, 75 per cent gained A—B grades, and this was better than the school's predictions. In the AS examination, performance was broadly in line with prediction with some improvement at the higher level. Currently students are making good progress.
- Students with learning difficulties generally make at least satisfactory progress because of the targeted and often specialist support they receive. Girls make better progress than boys.
- The subject makes a satisfactory contribution to students' overall personal development. Students' favourite subjects are linked to practical opportunities and the level of engagement they provide. They expressed some reservations about English because they did not often have similar practical opportunities.

## Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning of English is satisfactory.

- The department is composed largely of experienced teachers. Teachers are confident, have very good subject knowledge and awareness of the demands of the examinations. With higher attaining students and with sixth form students these strengths are particularly evident. Good relationships with students, enthusiasm for the subject, established classroom routines and effective questioning carry lessons along and in these lessons students and students generally make good progress.
- With lower attaining groups, progress is satisfactory because teachers tend to use the same strategies, often relying on themselves as the key resource without the support of carefully chosen resources or practical approaches to ensure students' engagement. In the best lessons with these groups, the teacher had a precise view of what was to be achieved and had identified the key steps in the learning and the practical activities engaged and motivated the students. The sequence

of steps from one activity to another was mapped well and plenaries were used periodically throughout the lesson to check on progress.

- The marking of GCSE coursework is detailed and students are given good information to improve their work. Students know their target grades. The department is beginning to use Assessing Students' Progress materials and giving more detailed feedback to students in Years 7-9. Currently there have been limited opportunities to moderate students' work in the lower school and develop a shared, accurate view of levels.

## Quality of curriculum

The quality of the English curriculum is satisfactory.

- The English curriculum provides a range and balance of texts and experiences and satisfactorily promotes students' enjoyment and overall achievement. The curriculum includes analysis of film and other media work. There is a balanced programme, which includes opportunities to study drama, poetry and novels at Key Stage 3. The department has introduced or modified units of work for Year 7 in the light of the new curriculum.
- At GCSE, the majority of students are entered for both English Language and Literature. The use of ICT in lessons is limited although there is good access for 'writing up' course work. There are some enrichment opportunities for sixth formers and non-examination groups. Additional revision classes operate over Easter.
- The higher-level teaching assistant is beginning to be effectively used to target specific individuals and groups.
- Resources are distributed around the department's teaching rooms. There is an urgent need to develop a centralised bank of resources to support teachers when teaching units of work to lower sets.

## Leadership and management of English

The leadership and management of English are satisfactory.

- The school's leadership has taken immediate action in the light of the English results and made direct interventions to support the department. You have a clear and accurate picture of what needs to be done. There is an effective action plan for the department, which is monitored, half-termly.
- The head of department took on the role for a planned limited tenure. Within that time, she has brought the department together, fostered teamwork, tightened up aspects of its operation and during the period of severe staffing difficulties ensured that it kept functioning.
- Teachers work hard and are very committed to the students but because there has been too little analysis of results in the light of national standards departmental evaluation did not realistically judge its effectiveness. The head of department has recognised this. The department is working more closely with the local authority and the latest self-evaluation indicates a more realistic appraisal of the

department's strengths and the significant and urgent developments that need to take place.

- The department now has detailed systems to track students' progress and these are beginning to be used effectively in Year 11 to identify students who require additional support. There is still a need to embed the use of tracking data across the whole department both to identify students in danger of slipping behind and also so that teachers understand their specific responsibility for students' year-on-year improvement in English.
- Whilst targets are challenging, the department requires training in the interpretation of performance data.

### Creativity in English

Younger students enjoy the opportunities for creative writing and older students enjoy discussions and opportunities to present their point of view. The department is aware of the importance of threading creative opportunities into the Key Stage 3 curriculum. Good use is made of a visiting author.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising standards in English Language and English Literature at GCSE
- ensuring that members of the English department analyse and interpret performance data effectively
- improving assessment through more effective moderation of students' work and embedding the use of the tracking system to monitor students' progress from Year 7 upwards
- ensuring that there are appropriate, centrally-located resources for each unit to support the teaching in lower sets.

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