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10 March 2009

Mrs H McDermott
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Dear Mrs McDermott

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 2-3 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 eight lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English vary across the key stages but are broadly in line with average overall. Students' achievement is good.

- The College has two phases of entry. The five form entry Key Stage 3 cohort increases to 15 form entry at Key Stage 4 as new students join the college from a local 11-14 High School.
- Standards on entry to the college in Year 7 are broadly average. Results of the national tests at the end of Key Stage 3 are consistently above average, confirming that students make good progress. The school has identified the need to increase the number of students who achieve the higher levels in English.

- The results for English Language in 2008 were slightly above average. The trend is upwards in English and results have improved markedly over the past five years. The school enters around half its students for GCSE English Literature and results were good in 2008 with a very high proportion of students achieving A/A* grades. Students perform well in the two English courses when compared with other subjects.
- Data about the value added across Key Stage 4 in English is variable. Girls make good progress but boys achieve less well. Other groups of students perform equally well. Students of Indian heritage do better than those from white British heritage.
- The school offers two courses in English in the sixth form. All students in recent years have achieved a pass grade in both courses although the number reaching the higher grades is below average. Standards overall are broadly in line with the national average. Progress is better in the combined course than in the English Literature course.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning of English is good.

- Teaching in English is good overall but variable in quality. In discussion, the response of students also varied. Students praised the good level of support provided and the lively and enthusiastic approach in some classes. However, other students, especially boys, were less engaged by lessons. This was confirmed by the lessons observed during the inspection. Students in higher sets tended to enjoy lessons more than those in lower sets, and girls tended to respond better than boys.
- Where lessons were good, relationships were strong and teachers monitored and supported individual students well. These lessons were varied and teachers made good use of a range of interactive approaches. At times, activities were open ended and encouraged creative responses. Teachers prepare students well for tests and examinations; as a result, they are clear about assessment criteria and examination requirements.
- Students in lower sets were not always fully engaged with activities, especially where the approaches were less lively. In these lessons, the pace of learning was slower and some students lost concentration. Opportunities were sometimes missed in lessons observed to model the process of writing and learning objectives did not always provide a clear enough sense of direction.
- The best marking in the department is of a very high standard. It provides detailed feedback to students and explains clearly what needs to be done to improve work. Not all marking is of this standard. In discussion, students were not clear enough about the next steps in their learning. This reflects the variability in marking and some inconsistency across the department in setting curricular targets for individual students.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is satisfactory with some good features.

- The curriculum enables most students to make good progress overall in English. It is less effective in promoting enjoyment for all students. Boys tend to respond less positively than girls and this is seen in the smaller than average proportion of boys who choose to continue with their studies in English in the sixth form.
- The school offers two courses in English in the sixth form. A Media Studies course is also available. Around half of all students are entered for English Literature at GCSE and a drama course is also provided through the options choice.
- The curriculum is well planned across all key stages. Units of work and supporting resources are thorough and provide good support to teachers. The Key Stage 3 curriculum is broad and well balanced although there is too little focus on moving image texts and the systematic promotion of wider, independent reading. All students are given opportunities to use the mobile laptops available in English.
- The library makes a good contribution to reading and literacy in the school. It operates a number of initiatives focused on reading including a book club, competitions and promotion of special events such as shadowing the Carnegie Prize.
- The range of extra curricular activities is satisfactory; they are mostly aimed at older students and related to examination support, although some younger students have been on theatre trips. Two interesting initiatives aimed at challenging more able students include a media project with the local newspaper and writing workshops with professional writers.

Leadership and management of English

The previous subject leader left at the end of last term. Since then, management responsibilities have been shared. A new subject leader was appointed in the week before this inspection.

- The current English team has good capacity for further improvement. The newly appointed head of department is a very effective classroom teacher in a good position to model good classroom practice. He has clear ideas about the subject and its development. The department also benefits from a core of experienced teachers who provide good leadership across the different key stages.
- The English department has a team of specialist teachers who work well together. There is clear commitment to continuing to improve provision for students. This is now a good opportunity for the new team to identify a new direction and shared purpose for its work.

- The college's senior leadership sets clear expectations for the department. There are effective structures for reviewing performance both on an individual and departmental basis. Data is analysed systematically and evidence is collected from lesson observations and work scrutiny. There are regular, detailed subject reviews.
- The department tracks the performance of students well and is in a good position to recognise under-achievement. There is good support for students in danger of falling behind, especially in the examination classes, through Easter revision sessions, booster classes, targeted support for a group of boys, and the work of teaching assistants.
- The department is very clear about the key areas for improvement. It has already identified in its development plan the need to improve the performance of boys, to achieve more higher grades in examinations and to address discrepancies in achievement in the sixth form. This reflects good self evaluation although the action plan needs to be clearer in identifying the central actions to be taken and the appropriate success criteria.

Creativity in English

The department acknowledges that there is no particular focus on creativity at present. However, the newly appointed subject leader is very clear about the importance of promoting creativity through encouraging students to develop an independent voice. Teachers are increasingly making use of drama based approaches in their work on Shakespeare. Some of the lessons observed featured effective open ended activities which made students think for themselves. The department is also involved in whole school initiatives on creativity including new approaches to research-based homework and thematic days which aim to develop transferable skills. Some of the department's enrichment activities, including the newspaper project and work with visiting writers, make a good contribution to creativity.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving achievement across the English courses in the sixth form
- providing a curriculum that engages all students equally, including boys and students 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

Philip Jarrett HMI
Subject Adviser for English