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Mr C A Mason
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Dear Mr Mason

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 9-10 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 observations of nine lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English are broadly average overall. Students' achievement is satisfactory.

- Standards on entry are average in English. They remain average as students move through the school as confirmed by GCSE results in recent years.
- While overall achievement is satisfactory the school recognizes that students tend to achieve better in most of their other subjects than they do in English. The school also recognizes the need to improve the standards of middle ability girls and to increase the number of girls gaining the very highest GCSE grades. Work seen during the visit suggests efforts to do this are having impact.
- Recent results suggest that lower attaining students and students with statements of educational needs tend to make better progress than most students.

- During Key Stage 3 progress is satisfactory but standards show some variation from year to year, especially at the higher levels.
- Students make satisfactory progress in lessons. They take a positive interest but their progress is constrained by a lack of consistent challenge for students of differing abilities.
- In the sixth form students attain above average standards in English language and their achievement is good. Standards are average in English literature and achievement satisfactory.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory.

- Relationships between teachers and students are good. There is a positive working atmosphere in lessons. Students say they enjoy English, the activities they do and the varied resources they encounter. Their behaviour is good.
- Teachers have secure subject knowledge. They make sure students cover all aspects of the syllabus. Many of the learning materials teachers prepare are helpful in crystallizing the students' understanding of difficult concepts such as the technical structures of poetry. Feedback on course work is good.
- The work of support staff is good. They are clear about the intended focus of each lesson and use this clarity to help their students make good progress.
- In the sixth form students make good progress in developing effective research skills to support their assignments, frequently making good use of internet sources.
- Some assessment practice is excellent but overall its use is not consistently effective. Marking is not always explicit or frequent enough about strengths and improvement targets, especially at Key Stage 3. The school's rich seam of assessment data is not used effectively in lesson planning to make sure students are challenged according to their differing abilities. Methods to promote the impact of assessment such as individual tracking sheets are not consistent in their use or format. There is an emerging awareness of the central role of assessment in learning but a coherent approach is not yet embedded.
- The use of questions in lessons does not give students enough chance to make good progress in learning independently, especially the higher attainers. Too many questions ask for recall about texts and too few for deduction, evaluation or interpretation. In whole class discussions too many students were passive. Students hardly ever had the opportunity to respond to the views of others in these sessions and the pace of learning was too slow.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- Most students take GCSE English literature. Functional skills courses are being introduced. The availability of two advanced level courses in the sixth form is a strong feature.
- The curriculum at Key Stage 3 is undergoing gradual revision, starting in Year 7, with a view to incorporating the Assessing Students' Progress initiative (APP). This is an opportunity for a major overhaul of the Key Stage 3 curriculum to ensure provision is consistently and sharply matched to the needs of learners of all abilities.
- There is a major imbalance in the Key Stage 4 curriculum. The department has been slow to respond to the implications of reduced course work requirements. There are still Year 11 students with incomplete assignments. This overly long approach eats into time better used for developing the students' reading and writing skills to support their examinations.
- The teachers set a wide range of motivating and imaginative course work titles. The students' work on dramatic monologues is particularly engaging.
- The department encourages reading through its weekly library lessons, including support aimed at those needing more help with reading. This is effective in promoting wider reading and most students spoken to said they read in their own time.
- There is an enjoyable range of enrichment activities that include theatre trips, links with other schools, poetry competitions and help for examinations.

Leadership and management of English

The quality of leadership and management is satisfactory.

- Senior leaders in partnership with the subject leader effectively analyse data and other information to identify where improvements are needed. This has led to some important changes such as the restructuring of groups and amended deployment of teachers.
- The subject leader is a good class room teacher with senior experience in the examination of Advanced Level English. She has initiated activities that are providing a clearer focus on how to raise standards such as joint marking of mock examinations. This collaborative approach provides a good template for further developments. Her devolution of responsibility for some initiatives to other members of the department is a sound way of involving colleagues in shaping the direction of the department.
- The subject's improvement planning document has the right focus on raising standards but lacks the robust criteria required to help the leaders evaluate the impact of initiatives.

- The subject leader has a reliable understanding of what constitutes effective and less effective teaching and learning. However, the use of systematic monitoring to drive improvement across the department is not yet rigorous enough.

Creativity in English

The performance of middle attaining girls has been identified as an area for improvement. The school is approaching this issue through the national "Narrowing the Gap" initiative. The project includes another school from the local authority and one from a nearby local authority. The girls identified are a cross section of middle attainers. Following consultation the girls decided to work on the production of a monologue, a genre that they had previously encountered and enjoyed during Key Stage 3. At a later session the girls were introduced to some examples of the genre and discussed its features. A "Making Monologues" day was subsequently held. A theatre company performed monologues and organized a number of drama activities which led to the girls writing and performing their own pieces with their performances recorded. Their pieces have been used for GCSE original writing coursework and for GCSE speaking and listening assessments. The girls are planning a learning package that they will teach to a group of Year 8 girls to help them produce their own monologues.

Areas for improvement which we discussed included:

- raising students' achievement in English, particularly for girls, so that it matches achievement in other subjects
- making sure that curriculum plans and lessons make sufficient use of assessment procedures to challenge students of all attainments
- establishing robust systems for monitoring, evaluation and development at middle leader level to promote consistently good provision.

I hope these observations are useful to you 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. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half term and made available to the team at the next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Chris Griffin
Additional Inspector