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Mr R Fone
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Dear Mr Fone

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 9-10 June 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 spelling and handwriting. 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 ten lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English are broadly average. Students' achievement is good.

- There has been a sustained and substantial improvement in GCSE English results over the past few years. They were below average as recently as 2006. The 2008 results were in line with the national average and current predictions are for above average results this year. Most students are entered for GCSE English Literature. However, results have failed to improve in line with the English results and the department is increasingly offering Media Studies as an alternative for identified students.
- The gap between girls' and boys' attainment in GCSE English has been above average but reduced last year, with indications that it will have narrowed still further when the 2009 results are published.

- Although the department has been successful at increasing the number of students who achieve grade C or better in English, it acknowledges that too few students achieve A*/A grades in either English or English Literature.
- Standards in the English Literature and English Language courses in the sixth form are also broadly in line with the national average.
- Achievement in English overall is good. This reflects the systematic and continuing improvement at GCSE as well as current progress by students in the school. The school's tracking of achievement is very thorough and recent results confirm that it is effective. The school's records indicate that current standards at GCSE and in the sixth form reflect good achievement by students.
- There are no substantial differences in achievement between the different groups in the school. Although boys attain less highly than girls in the GCSE examination, they make as much progress while in the school. Other groups including students of an Asian Pakistani heritage and students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities also do well.
- Although attainment on entry is in line with average, substantial numbers of boys do not reach the expected level in writing by the beginning of Year 7.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning of English is good.

- Most students enjoy lessons in English. They speak positively about the support and extra help provided by teachers and about lively lessons that enable them to participate fully.
- Relationships between teachers and students were very strong in the lessons observed. Teachers engaged students through a variety of activities and a good range of resources. Lessons had good pace and students enjoyed opportunities to make use of the interactive whiteboard. Starter activities were frequently well used to kick-start lessons and good teacher subject knowledge kept students on task.
- In the most effective lessons, teachers managed discussion well and involved all students. In some lessons observed, teachers allowed students to call out answers and this limited the involvement of others and slowed the pace. Students were given interesting topics to write about but opportunities were sometimes missed to enhance students' writing through teacher modelling.
- In discussion, students were not always clear enough about how to improve their work. This is related to the quality of feedback by teachers. The best marking gives students clear guidance on progress against specific assessment focuses and identifies well what they need to do next. Some marking is less effective, especially in identifying the next steps for students.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is good.

- In recent years, above average numbers of students have been entered for English Literature as well as English at GCSE. The department now offers Media Studies at GCSE as an alternative or additional qualification. Drama is also available as an option choice. There are two English courses available in the sixth form at Advanced level. There are also some opportunities for student choices after early entry for GCSE in November Year 11. This enables the department to personalise the curriculum in interesting ways for students.
- There are a number of innovative features to the English curriculum. The flexible use of staff in Year 11 and in the English Language Advanced level course enables teachers to work in areas of particular expertise. The department is also currently revising its Key Stage 3 curriculum and plans to provide a transitional Year 9 course that will prepare students more effectively for GCSE.
- The curriculum is also being revised in Years 7 and 8 to provide a core of units that will ensure greater consistency across classes, alongside opportunities for teachers to select particular units that will meet the needs of their own students. This potentially represents a broad and effective curriculum although at present there are no plans for the systematic promotion of students' independent, wider reading.
- Assessment is integrated well into the English curriculum.
- Information and communication technology (ICT) is well used within English. Teachers make use of the ICT suite as well as mobile laptops to enable students to write and edit course work. Media work is a significant part of the developing curriculum and students are given good opportunities both to analyse, and to produce their own, moving image texts.
- The department offers a range of enrichment activities alongside additional learning support for particular students. This includes a Readathon, involvement in the LA Carnegie shadowing, an annual Shakespeare performance and workshop, and visits to places such as the Bradford media museum. However, the department acknowledges that these initiatives tend to be targeted at particular groups of students and aims to broaden the impact of its extra-curricular activities.
- The work sample suggested that some students, especially those with low prior attainment, are given too few opportunities for extended writing.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are good.

- The new subject leadership model, where several subject leaders jointly share responsibility, is working well. The subject leaders are knowledgeable and enthusiastic. They have different but complementary skills and work closely together. They are well supported by the school's senior leadership.
- The subject team is a potentially strong one with a core of good and enthusiastic teachers. Teachers work well together and share resources. There is a good sense of direction. The capacity for further improvement is good.
- The subject leaders have identified some clear priorities for development including revising the Key Stage 3 curriculum and raising the achievement of the more able students. These are captured in a focused development plan although at present the plan does not identify the actions to be taken or how progress will be measured.
- Subject provision is monitored effectively. There is careful tracking of students' progress and the school makes imaginative use of Learning Coaches to provide targeted support for identified students. The department has reviewed teaching and learning through a substantial and effective programme of lesson observations and work scrutiny. This enabled it to review strengths in current approaches and areas for further improvement.
- The senior leaders have an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses in English.

Spelling and handwriting

Subject leaders accept that there is no systematic approach at present to the teaching of spelling or handwriting. This is likely to change as the department implements fully the APP approach to assessment which includes spelling as one of the writing focuses. Many students lack confidence in their ability to spell correctly. Where spelling is taught, it tends to take place within starter activities or in response to a perceived weakness in a group of students. The correction of spelling within teachers' marking is variable. Teachers sometimes identify weaknesses in spelling as an individual target for students but students lack sufficient understanding of spelling rules and patterns to follow this up effectively.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- increasing the number of students who obtain A*/A grades in English and English Literature at GCSE
- reviewing approaches to writing at Key Stage 3 to provide a more coordinated response to the significant number of students who join the school with below average standards in writing.

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