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Mrs L Lawson
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Dear Mrs Lawson

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 15-16 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 seven lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

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

- Standards at the end of Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 are below national expectations but not significantly so.
- The difference between boys' and girls' attainment by the end of Key Stage 4 is narrower than that seen nationally because boys make better progress than girls over their time in the school.
- Progress made by students at Key Stage 3 varies in relation to the quality of teaching received but is satisfactory overall.
- Achievement at Key Stage 4 is good. The school's tracking of progress indicates that students in Year 10 are achieving above expectations,

and that Year 11 students are largely in line to achieve their challenging target grades at GCSE.

- Progress seen in lessons was good overall and related directly to the quality of teaching.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning in English is good.

- The English department has benefited from recent appointments which have given it a critical mass of lively, knowledgeable and innovative teachers whose impact on standards and attitudes to learning is clearly evident.
- Lesson observations showed a pattern of predominantly good teaching, some of it outstanding. The motivating use of group work enabled students to develop and consolidate their skills of negotiation, collaboration and presentation. Where they were actively involved, as with the effective use of information and communication technology (ICT) to engage them and frame their learning, students responded with real commitment.
- Not all teaching was of this standard. On occasions students did not make sufficient progress because they had to listen passively for too long and had little opportunity to show and develop what they knew and could do.
- The standard of marking was similarly varied. At best marking clearly showed students their current standard and what to do to improve, but sometimes comments were not precise enough to take them forward. The assessment folders provided that kind of precision, and also helpfully involved students and parents in the process. In discussion most students were able to say what their current standards were and what they needed to do to improve.
- Where assessment was integral to the conduct of lessons it became a powerful element in students' progress and developing independence. This was an aspect of a number of the most successful lessons where students knew what and how they would be learning, and how they would be able to judge their success.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is satisfactory.

- At Key Stage 4 there is a good range of courses: English language and literature, drama and media studies. The good progress students make, particularly in literature, media and drama, indicates enjoyment, and a good match of the curriculum to their needs and interests
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is currently being revised. The schemes of work so far produced indicate a good and potentially motivating range of experiences, including attention to literature from other cultures,

media and the moving image, clear references to assessment, and cross-curricular links to a number of other subjects. It is too early to evaluate the impact of this planning.

- Enrichment activities are modest in scope. This is because the department has rightly focused energies on the quality of teaching and student support in order successfully to correct the recent shortfall in achievement in Years 10 and 11. Students would appreciate more opportunity to develop their interests through trips and clubs.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are good.

- The department is well led. The recently appointed Head of Department is a very effective teacher and in a good position to support others in achieving similarly high standards.
- Similar qualities are evident in the teachers leading Key Stage 3 work and the newly introduced media studies. They are energetic, popular with students and imaginative in their approaches to teaching and learning.
- The school has been resolute in only appointing staff in a position to bring real quality to the department's teaching. As a consequence the department has had to manage a period (happily at an end by September) without a full complement of regular staff. Supply and other staff have been exceptionally well-supported however so that the potentially negative effect on students' experience in English has been minimised.
- Underachievement, particularly at Key Stage 4, has been accurately identified, and measures taken to enhance students' chances of success. As a result substantially higher numbers of students are achieving well, with the majority successfully meeting challenging targets.
- An English Student Panel meets regularly to report on and evaluate their experience of the English curriculum. They take this responsibility entirely seriously, and their views are influential in curricular planning and teaching approaches. They evidently appreciate the recent improvements in teaching and assessment and feel well served by enjoyable, but properly demanding, English teaching.
- Regular departmental meetings have successfully fostered a team approach, so that strengths in teaching and planning are valuably shared, together with an achievable vision for improvement. Capacity for improvement is therefore good.

Spelling and handwriting

- Standards in spelling and handwriting are satisfactory.
- Curriculum time for spelling is given including lists of words to be learned in Years 7 and 8.

- After that provision is more piecemeal. Year 9 students have individual errors to address and corrections learned through the look/cover/write procedure. At Key Stage 4 spellings are corrected through the normal marking process, though students said that misspellings were not followed up systematically by teachers.
- No formal attention is given to teaching handwriting.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that all students make the same progress as the most successful at Key Stage 3 by improving the consistency of teaching across the key stage
- sharing best practice in assessment so that students are aware in all lessons of what they will be learning and what will count as success.

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

Mick Saunders
Additional Inspector