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Mr A Perry
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Dear Mr Perry

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 29-30 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 well above average at Key Stages 3 and 4. Standards in the Sixth Form are in line with the national average. Students' achievement is good at all key stages.

- Students come into the school with standards that are above average, although it is recognised that writing is weaker than other literacy skills. They make very good progress over time.
- The majority of students achieve GCSE grades A*-C in both English Language and English Literature.
- The gap between boys' and girls' attainment is narrowing. There is no significant difference between the standards achieved by other groups.
- The rate of progress in lessons varied according to the quality of teaching. It was good overall, and sometimes outstanding.

- In A level courses students achieve grades which exceed expectations. Similarly good progress was observed in sixth form lessons

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning in English is good.

- No unsatisfactory teaching was observed on this visit, and the majority of lessons were good or better. The department is in a strong position to raise the quality of all its teaching because it is effective in sharing the most successful approaches.
- Students enjoy English. Their enthusiasm was evident in nearly all lessons observed. The large numbers who choose courses in the sixth form reflect a positive experience of English in the main school. Students speak highly of their English teachers and they appreciate the way in which they are challenged and supported to do the best work they can. The warmth of relationships and teachers' high expectations were consistent features in nearly all lessons.
- Teachers have very good subject knowledge which supports well the development of students' own knowledge and understanding. In the best lessons there was an outstanding match of activities to students' interests and potential. Through well-paced pair and group work students shared opinions, insights and conclusions which accelerated their learning and increased their confidence and independence.
- In the few less successful lessons students' opportunities to show what they knew and could do were limited because they had to listen passively to the teacher for too long.
- Assessment is very effective in English. All marking follows a departmental policy which ensures detailed commentary with well-formulated targets for future writing. This precise feedback clearly enables students to make strides in the quality of their work. Progress is carefully tracked so that those not achieving as well as they should are identified and helped.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The curriculum enables students to make good progress because it is well-matched to their needs and potential.
- An outstanding feature is the way that the curriculum has taken imaginative account of the schools' changing intake. For example, the many black students in the school achieve above expectations in response to teaching which reflects and respects a variety of cultures.
- There is a good range of courses including drama and media studies which students say they enjoy, and in which they do well.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is well planned and provides students with a motivating range of experiences. The curriculum map and schemes

of work show a commitment to creativity and to well-supported independent learning. Functional skills, including the use of information and communication technology, are effectively integrated, together with clearly identified opportunities for cross-curricular links. My visit coincided with an excellent example of cross-curricular thinking, where the English content of a day given over to learning and thinking about the Holocaust was outstandingly effective.

- GCSE and Advanced Level courses are mapped out to enable effective phased attention to course work and examination requirements. The success of these arrangements is shown by students' high standards at GCSE and good achievement across every key stage, including the sixth form.
- The department's determination to encourage and support wider reading is evident in the provision of a fortnightly library lesson. However, students are not always sufficiently aware of the purpose of these sessions, so their potential for developing skills and interests goes unrealised.
- Extra-curricular provision is acknowledged by the department to be an area for development. Students very much appreciate theatre visits and English-related trips. The Reading Club is similarly popular. Students say they would like a greater range of such opportunities.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are good.

- The acting head of department has managed to ensure continuity in a high achieving department, and has brought to its work his own distinctive principles. These include a commitment to creativity, a sensitivity to background and culture, and a determination to open up possibilities for students through teaching which connects with their interests and inspires them.
- He is himself a highly effective teacher, and is therefore in a strong position to model for others approaches which motivate students and lead to high achievement.
- Regular, accurate and supportive monitoring means that the strengths of the department are well-known and weaknesses identified and acted on. In order to make predominantly good teaching even better, lesson observations should focus more explicitly on the progress that students make.
- The department works well together. For example, the team approach to the moderation of students' work results in assessment which is consistent and accurate. Similarly, the commitment to collaboration and mutual support means that the department welcomes and nurtures newly qualified teachers exceptionally well.
- The department has produced a thorough self-evaluation and an improvement plan which connects well with that of the school. Proposed developments are set out with helpful clarity. Measurable

outcomes arising from them are less clear and could usefully be made sharper.

Spelling and handwriting

- The teaching of spelling is not a formal part of English schemes of work, though some starter activities to lessons have a spelling focus.
- Spellings are corrected through a consistent approach set out in the department's marking policy. These procedures are effective because students' spelling improves over time.
- Where spelling is an issue in students' work, a target reflecting that will be given. Progress is subsequently checked by teachers.
- Students understand how spelling is marked. They recognise that it relates to individuals and their writing and consider it to be an effective approach.
- There is no formal teaching of handwriting. It does not appear in the department's schemes of work, and students do not regard it as something that needs to receive general attention.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included

- ensuring that the monitoring of teaching prioritises the pace of students' progress in lessons
- reviewing the planning and conduct of library lessons so that students have a clearer sense of their purpose.

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