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Dear Miss Litton

Ofsted survey inspection programme – English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 22 and 23 September 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 pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is outstanding.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is outstanding.

- Overall attainment is well above national averages and continuing to improve under new leadership. Attainment in English is generally higher than for comparable schools and exceptionally high for the most able pupils in each key stage. There has been an upward trend over the past three years, with unvalidated GCSE results for 2009 indicating a further rise and a significant closing of the gap between boys' attainment and that of girls.

- Progress is at least good across all groups and outstanding for the most able. Through systematic use of data, the department sets challenging targets and tracks the progress of individuals and groups well.
- Students have very positive attitudes to learning. They are keen to do well and enjoy independent investigation and debate. Students work well collaboratively and independently, with particular strengths in speaking, reading and writing.
- Students' personal development is strongly supported by English. Spiritual, moral and social issues are tackled through literature and through discursive and creative writing. Older students make a positive contribution, helping slow or reluctant readers in Year 7 and Year 8.
- Good standards of literacy and well developed oral skills support students' preparation for the workplace.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is outstanding.

- Overall, English teaching provides excellent support for learning. Shared strengths of lessons observed included clear planning, good questioning skills, effective classroom management and well-informed enthusiasm. During lessons and in the marking of work, teachers successfully balanced encouragement with guidance on how to improve. Through whole-class question and answer sessions, teachers checked and confirmed students' knowledge of ground recently covered.
- Students are regularly encouraged to present their findings and ideas to the class and to evaluate the quality of their own work. However, there is scope for more peer-assessment, so that students learn from each other and develop their skills as discerning critics.
- Occasionally, teachers played too dominant a role or the pace flagged.
- While group work encouraged collaborative problem-solving, teachers did not always ensure that all students actively participated.
- Schemes of work, wall displays and students' responses indicate that English teachers use modern technology to good effect.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The curriculum in English is outstanding.

- Curriculum planning, review and development meet the needs of all students very effectively. There is a good range of investigative, persuasive, evaluative and creative activity.
- Schemes of work have a clear framework: a 'warm up' activity followed by time to share thinking, to explore, to feed back and to evaluate. They include well-placed links to students' current concerns and interests.

- As well as allowing for acceleration towards GCSE and AS for the most able, coverage of National Curriculum content and skills in Years 7 and 8 allows greater breadth of approach in Year 9 for all.
- For those with learning difficulties, there is an integrated learning programme, with a single base for pupils and continuity of teaching. Feedback from pupils and parents has been very positive. Systematic tracking shows that these pupils make as much progress as other groups.
- Students' understanding of global issues is well supported through choice of text and topics. There is scope for greater interaction with diverse communities nationally, to enhance students' understanding of multi-cultural Britain and to extend their experience of language.
- A good range of enrichment activities, principally for younger students, is run through the Library Resource Centre.
- The performing arts specialism has a significant impact on English department activities. It offers a very practical and technically varied approach to many aspects of the curriculum.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are outstanding.

- The impact of recent initiatives, such as the allocation of specific responsibilities to staff, use of data to drive improvement, and development of schemes of work, can be seen in the continuing upward trend of attainment and the progress of targeted groups.
- Regular collection and analysis of data very successfully shape planning, self-evaluation and target-setting.
- Strengths within the department are used well to model best practice, support individuals and lead continuing professional development.
- The departmental handbook and schemes of work are well structured and clear, defining good practice and setting priorities for professional development and improving attainment.
- The quality of teaching and learning is systematically monitored by the school's senior leadership team and the head of department.
- The department's capacity for continuing improvement is excellent.

Spelling and handwriting

- The department has no specific handwriting policy. It is an aspect of the more general drive for well presented work.
- Teachers tackle spelling as part of vocabulary extension, often based in creative writing. Misspellings in written work are usually, but not invariably, identified. Pupils do not routinely make corrections.
- Attention to spelling and handwriting is part of learning support, especially in Years 7 and 8. ICT resources are used well here.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- managing group work to ensure that all students make a positive contribution
- extending students' appreciation of multi-cultural Britain and its impact on language by extending links with schools set in very different contexts.

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. 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

Patricia Metham
Her Majesty's Inspector