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Mrs M Wright
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Dear Mrs Wright

Ofsted survey inspection programme – English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 23 and 24 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 satisfactory.

Achievement in English

Achievement is satisfactory.

- Standards attained by students are broadly average, including in the sixth form.
- The three most recent sets of validated results show that students' progress has been below the national rate. In particular, some students with lower prior attainment, often boys, made too little progress.

- After a significant dip to below average levels in 2008, provisional results in GCSE English show an improvement in 2009. Girls continue to do better than boys.
- The quality of learning observed suggests that recent changes are having a positive impact. Behaviour in English lessons was good, and students of all abilities responded positively to teaching which was stimulating and clear. Students' work indicates that most are well motivated to do their best.
- Of the students spoken to, several of those in Key Stage 3 said they enjoyed reading, writing, drama and discussions. Such enjoyment was less evident amongst the Key Stage 4 students.
- Those who take Advanced level courses in English language, English literature and media studies enjoy the experience and generally make the expected progress.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching is satisfactory and improving.

- Improvements to teaching have recently stemmed the decline in standards.
- In the lessons observed, relationships were generally good. Particular strengths included teachers' subject knowledge and clarity about the objectives for learning. In the better lessons, a well paced variety of lively activities involved students well. Such teaching conveyed warmth, aspiration and enthusiasm, which students across the age range appreciated. Effective use was made of text and images to stimulate students' thinking, and writing had a realistic purpose. Students had well-guided opportunities to practise their reading and speaking and listening skills. Feedback during the lesson sometimes led students to make rapid progress.
- Weaker aspects seen included less effective planning to ensure all students achieved appropriate expectations. Tasks and questioning were not always designed well to assess or build understanding. Support staff were not always directed well enough to have a strong impact on students' progress.
- Students are guided to understand what their regularly assessed levels or grades mean and they are involved in setting medium-term goals. Their work is marked regularly and helpfully, but there is little evidence that they act on the guidance given.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The curriculum is satisfactory.

- Teachers are revising the curriculum at Key Stage 3 and improving the effectiveness and originality of schemes of work. They also contribute to cross-curricular projects. Both boys and girls in this age group have

responded well to new schemes which build on their interests and experiences.

- Teachers' enthusiasm stimulates younger students' interest in reading different genres and new authors. Drama and links to the local theatre provide some enrichment, but students of all ages say they would like more creative outlets.
- The school identifies students with weak literacy skills early. The recent introduction of smaller groups, taught by appropriately skilled teachers, has enhanced the support for these students.
- GCSE courses in English, English literature and media studies enable nearly all students to gain two qualifications, and drama is also available. Entry level qualifications and intensive support with revision and coursework have contributed to improved achievement. To increase engagement, the department sees the need to try more creative approaches in Key Stage 4.
- Few boys have been attracted recently to take English literature at A level. Courses in English language and media studies are more popular with them.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

The leadership and management of English are satisfactory.

- There is a strong commitment to raising achievement. Challenging targets have been set, additional resources identified and, in the new head of subject's first year in post, some improvements have been seen.
- Self evaluation is realistic and draws on students' views and data. Sensible plans to build lasting improvement have been made.
- The teaching team combines a good range of experience and specialist expertise. Arrangements for induction have worked well.
- Good practice is being spread through monitoring and opportunities to share successful approaches, but there is scope to improve the consistency and effectiveness of teaching through clearer guidance.

Spelling and handwriting

Guidance for English teachers briefly refers to promoting accurate spelling. Teaching for younger pupils with weak literacy skills builds on phonic learning appropriately, but its impact has not been evaluated. Some students are concerned about weaknesses in spelling and handwriting. Teachers sometimes mark spelling errors and indicate broad targets to improve handwriting, but there was little sign that this was making a difference.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- Accelerating pupils' progress through

- consistently effective planning with suitably high expectations of all pupils
- more effective use of support staff in classrooms
- clearer guidance on how students might make best use of feedback from teachers
- increasing the engagement of students through more opportunities to learn actively and be creative.

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

Susan Bowles
Her Majesty's Inspector