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Dear Mrs Herriman

Ofsted survey inspection programme – English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 29 and 30 September 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. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is good.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- Standards have risen substantially in English over recent years and the provisional GCSE results for 2009 show that attainment in English language was broadly in line with the national average. Results have improved by 20% over the past two years. Standards in lessons observed confirmed average levels of attainment. Results in English literature at GCSE are not yet as good.

- Standards in the sixth form are also broadly average although performance in English literature tends to be better than English language. Most students achieve pass rates in their A-level subjects but fewer achieve the higher grades.
- Since standards on entry to the school are below average, the 2009 GCSE results confirmed that students made good progress. Achievement has been better at Key Stage 4 than Key Stage 3. The contextual value added (CVA) data for progress from Key Stage 3 to 4 over the past two years places the school in the top 20% nationally.
- There are no significant differences between the achievement of groups in the school although the gap between girls' and boys' performance in English is no better than the national average.
- Progress in lessons observed was good overall. Students are given many opportunities in English to express their views and collaborate together and this helps them to gain in confidence.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Students across the different key stages expressed very positive views about their English lessons. They praised highly the passion and enthusiasm of their teachers, as well as the very good quality of care and support.
- Teaching observed varied in quality but was good overall. Relationships were strong and students were engaged by a good variety of active approaches. Teachers were clear about assessment criteria and are developing some effective uses of self and peer assessment. At best, learning objectives were simple and clear, providing good direction to lessons. At times, however, planning was too much based on activities rather than the outcomes for students.
- Where teaching was satisfactory rather than good, this sometimes resulted from plans that did not meet the needs of students of different ability well enough. In some lessons, teachers did not evaluate progress clearly because discussion was limited to a small number of students and questioning failed to probe their understanding sufficiently.
- Most students understand how to improve their work in English and this reflects good curricular target setting and review. Marking varied in quality. The best was both detailed and helpful; less effective marking did not give clear enough feedback on strengths and weaknesses.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The curriculum in English is good.

- Students enjoy English and the curriculum enables them to make good progress overall.

- There are detailed and helpful schemes of work in place across all key stages. The Key Stage 3 curriculum is broad and balanced, with progression planned across units on topics such as poetry and Shakespeare study. A range of resources and detailed individual lesson plans support teachers well, especially those who are new to the department. The department is currently working to revise the Key Stage 3 programme in the light of recent national changes and this will enable it to build in some more individual elements. At present, there is no systematic approach to promoting wider reading and too little use of information and communication technology (ICT).
- The school provides a wide range of initiatives to support and develop students' work in English. This includes revision days, intervention programmes and targeted support for individual students. Students acknowledge how much time English teachers provide outside classes to help them to improve their work. The school has also worked to personalise the curriculum through early entry for GCSE, identified literacy sessions in Key Stage 3 and initiatives such as the Gold group. Perhaps as a result, there are fewer enrichment activities available in English although a reading club and other out-of-school activities are being introduced this term.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are good with some outstanding features.

- Very good leadership over recent years has led to a substantial improvement of standards in English. The senior leadership team has also dealt very effectively with the recent departure of the previous head of department, appointing an external consultant to work with the team, focusing especially on training younger members of the department to develop management roles within English. There are very good links between the senior leadership team and the English department.
- The school has a good understanding of strengths and weaknesses in English. It has identified clearly the key areas for further improvement, based on an effective analysis of trends in standards. Assessment data are used well to identify underperformance by groups of students and to establish appropriate support and intervention.
- There is a very thorough programme of monitoring and evaluation which has led to effective self-review. This includes systematic lesson observation, well-managed work sampling, and checks of teachers' planning. This provides good feedback to teachers about progress, although lesson observations sometimes focus too much on teacher actions than their impact on learning.
- The department has a good capacity for further improvement. Current plans for further developments in English are based on a thoughtful and reflective view of the subject; this is evident in ideas for refreshing the Key Stage 3 curriculum. However, work remains to be done to secure the

future leadership of the department once the current temporary arrangement ends.

Spelling and handwriting

The school has taken some steps to establish spelling as a cross-curricular responsibility and it is promoted in a range of subjects, including ICT and science as well as within tutor periods. In English, spelling is sometimes taught within starter sessions of lessons. The view of students was that spelling is not given particular priority within English lessons and this was confirmed by the work scrutiny. Some teachers identify and correct spelling mistakes in students' work but this varies considerably. Standards of handwriting and presentation in general are not consistently high enough across English.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

Improving the proportion of teaching that is good or outstanding by:

- ensuring that lessons are planned around students' needs as learners rather than the teaching activities
- reviewing students' progress in lessons through questioning that draws more students into discussion and encourages them to explain their ideas more fully
- considering the needs of students of different ability more carefully when planning lessons
- better feedback to students on how they can improve the quality of their work.

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 and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be made available to the team for the next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Philip Jarrett
Her Majesty's Inspector