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Mrs A Lakey
Executive Director
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Dear Mrs Lakey

Ofsted survey inspection programme – English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 14 and 15 October 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 satisfactory.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is satisfactory and improving.

- Attainment is below average but has improved at an accelerating rate over the past two years.
- Provisional results for 2009 show that 54% of Year 11 achieved Grade C or above in GCSE English.
- Achievement is currently satisfactory and improving well. Challenging targets set for students' progress in English and English Literature were met last year. More students in Year 9 reached level 6.

- The gap between boys' and girls' achievement remains bigger than average, and is most marked for those boys with special educational needs who receive free school meals.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching is satisfactory.

- The quality of teaching is variable; lessons observed ranged in quality from satisfactory to outstanding.
- Relationships were consistently respectful, because adults made their expectations clear and were positive and helpful.
- Teachers showed a clear grasp of the skills students needed and used an engaging variety of relevant activities to help them learn. They made effective use of resources and displays, and successfully involved students in applying success criteria to their work.
- Marking is generally good, although comments are occasionally too vague. In the best cases, students had responded to specific guidance by developing their work.
- Teachers' questioning and leadership of discussion were not consistently effective. In the best lessons, teachers gave students well-defined opportunities to talk. Their questioning drew out more fully reasoned opinions, and they gave students time to rehearse orally the more formal constructions which they were learning to write. However, in too many lessons teachers did too much of the talking.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The curriculum is satisfactory.

- The scheme of work for Years 7 to 9 has been rewritten to improve breadth, continuity and progression. Both boys and girls find the new course stimulating and this is contributing to better attitudes and achievement.
- The curriculum offers opportunities for creative work, speaking and listening, drama and learning about modern media. Appealing class texts and regular private reading time are stirring interest in books.
- Several new approaches are being trialled to raise achievement. Single sex teaching groups have recently started in Year 10. Smaller classes for students in Years 7 and 10 who have weaker literacy skills follow suitably adapted pathways. Although there has been limited training for staff in teaching literacy, the observed Year 7 pupils were well supported and motivated to improve their reading skills.

- Students say that early entry for GCSE English and after-school sessions have given them stronger confidence that they can achieve their target grades, and improved results support their view.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

The leadership and management of English are satisfactory.

- The subject leader and the teaching team are working with strong determination to raise achievement. Self-evaluation is realistic and takes account of group differences. The subject leader has an ambitious vision for the subject and is a good role-model.
- The action plan is well focused and being energetically pursued. Good use is being made of internal and external advice. Since the school became part of the National Challenge programme, change has accelerated and had better impact across the full age range.
- There is a realistic appreciation that more teaching needs to be good. The small, committed team has recently been strengthened by an experienced teacher with complementary expertise. Staff regularly plan together and sometimes observe each other. The subject leader provides pertinent written guidance and practical help after observations. However, monitoring and professional development have not yet brought about the consistent quality of teaching which promotes higher achievement by all groups.

Spelling and handwriting

The subject handbook requires teachers to encourage accurate spelling, although schemes do not give guidance on how to do this. Students spoken to had little awareness of spelling rules or patterns, although some had learned strategies to cope with problems. Marking quite often indicates spelling errors. However, the sample of work seen did not suggest that poor handwriting or spelling improved over time as a result of specific guidance or interventions.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring all students have good opportunities to learn actively and fully explain their views
- accelerating the progress of all groups of students through
 - spreading good practice in assessing and meeting the needs of all students
 - monitoring the progress made by different groups in lessons.

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 & 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

Susan Bowles
Her Majesty's Inspector