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Mr P Mooney
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Mooney

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 3 and 4 November 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 six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is good.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- Overall, students' attainment at GCSE is broadly average. However, the proportion of students obtaining grades A* to C was significantly above the national average in both English language and English literature in 2008. Attainment was particularly high in English literature, although the number of students entered was lower than average.
- The standards reached represent good progress for the majority of students, from a starting point in Year 7 which is usually slightly below average. Progress is generally less impressive for students at the lower

end of the ability range, particularly girls, although the school's records show that many students with special educational needs and/or disabilities make good progress in reading and spelling.

- In the lessons observed, there were instances where the progress of the most able students, though at least satisfactory, was not as good as that of the majority of students in the class.
- Students are generally very well-behaved and bring positive attitudes to lessons. These strengths support their learning very well because they result in lessons that are normally orderly and focused entirely on the work in hand. Some students, however, have not acquired the necessary skills of independent learning by the time they embark on GCSE courses.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Satisfactory and good teaching was observed, with the majority of the lessons seen being taught well. The progress made by students confirms that the teaching is effective. Typically, teachers have strong subject knowledge and very good relationships with students. They know the students well and often provide good, unobtrusive support for individuals.
- The most effective lessons were planned well and moved along at a brisk pace with a variety of activities which kept all students involved in learning. In such lessons, information and communication technology was used well to enhance the teachers' exposition and the students' learning. In these lessons, teachers used question and answer sessions skilfully to tease out students' understanding and deepen their thinking.
- Some teaching was not as effective, despite having some good features. Two main shortcomings slowed the pace of learning. Firstly, the teacher talked for too long before the students were allowed to get down to work. Secondly, managing the behaviour of a small minority of students took too much time and interrupted the flow of the lesson. In some lessons with upper sets, there was too little challenge for the most able students.
- The use of day-to-day assessment and the marking of students' work are not consistent across the department. Students say they would welcome greater consistency and more precise indication of what they have done well and how they could improve.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the English curriculum is satisfactory.

- The English curriculum covers all that is required and pays good attention to personal and social education and the multi-cultural dimension.
- Beginning this year, all students in Key Stage 4 are following courses that lead to accredited qualifications, with the less-able students taking the entry level certificate. The curriculum for Key Stage 3 is not structured and planned as well as that in Key Stage 4. Schemes of work and guidance for

teachers are being produced. The Year 7 scheme is in place but, for Years 8 and 9, planning is sketchy.

- There is a range of intervention and support for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities and the school's records show that these are effective in accelerating progress for many of these students.
- The school offers some enrichment activities within school time and beyond, for example, theatre visits, and a creative writing club but this provision is not extensive.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

The effectiveness of leadership and management in English is good.

- The school's evaluation of the effectiveness of provision in English is good and sound plans are in place to tackle less successful areas. The school's senior team keeps a close eye on the department's work and its review, in January 2009, highlighted strengths and areas for development. These are being tackled with drive and determination. The support of the senior team and the agenda for improvement that it has set have maintained a momentum for improvement through the recent change of subject leadership.
- Monitoring and development of teaching are successful. Teachers have learned from feedback on their lessons and adjusted their methods as a result. A lead teacher role has been created in the department and several English teachers are members of the school's teaching and learning group.
- The newly appointed head of department has a clear sense of direction for the subject. Team work is developing well and there is a palpable commitment to improving provision and raising students' achievement.
- Students' attainment and progress are assessed regularly and detailed data are held by the school. However, these data are not used as effectively as they might be, within the department, to track all students' progress and to nip underachievement in the bud.

Spelling and handwriting

Standards of spelling for most students are at least average. Many students are not using a fluent joined script by the time they leave the school. There are no whole-school or departmental policies and guidance for the teaching of spelling and handwriting. The targets set in English for individual students sometimes include handwriting, spelling and general standards of presentation. However, students say that teachers do not emphasise these aspects of their work. Weaker students receive additional support with handwriting. However, staff do not routinely check that students' handwriting is sufficiently fluent and accurate at speed to meet the demands of the curriculum in all subjects.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- strengthening provision in Key Stage 3, in particular by:
 - improving the planning of the curriculum to ensure that work in each year always builds on what students have already learned and develops their skills for independent learning
 - making better use of assessment information within the department to keep a close track on students' progress in all aspects of the subject
- improving the achievement of the less-able students, especially girls, and providing greater challenge in lessons for the most able
- ensuring consistent approaches to marking so that students are clear about what they have done well and how they might improve 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

Pat Kime
Her Majesty's Inspector