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Dear Mr Talbot

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 17 and 18 November 2009 to look at work in English.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of English, the visit had a particular focus on the teaching 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 nine lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is satisfactory.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is satisfactory.

- Students enter the school with attainment which is broadly average.
- Attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 has generally been above average. However, over the last three years there has been a decline in GCSE English language results and significantly fewer students gained an A* to C grade in 2009. Results in GCSE English literature are consistently above average and increased in 2009. Standards and progress are higher in mathematics and science than in English.

- Students have made satisfactory progress in English over the last three years, although in 2009 a higher proportion than in previous years did not attain their expected grades. Lower ability students, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, make good progress in English. Middle and higher ability students make satisfactory progress.
- In the lessons seen, students were well behaved, cooperative, keen and listened well. They had the confidence to contribute and ask questions. In the higher ability groups observed, the quality of sustained dialogue between students was high.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching is good overall but varies across the department.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge. They combine whole-class commentary and dialogue effectively with opportunities for students to work individually or in groups. Teachers mostly make good use of assessment criteria to plan lessons although, in a minority of lessons, students were not clear enough about the purpose of the different activities and the intended outcome.
- In the best lessons observed, the teacher had a strong and positive relationship with the class. The challenges set to improve reading and writing were precise and supported by carefully planned activities and resources.
- Where teaching was less effective, there were weaknesses in the use of learning objectives and the assessment of learning outcomes. In these lessons, the sequencing of tasks lacked continuity and focus. Too few lessons made effective use of plenaries to summarise learning.
- Students know their targets and understand the criteria by which they are assessed. They value teachers' comments on how to improve their work and appreciate the specific help they receive to make progress.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- Students enjoy English because they are encouraged to discuss issues, express opinions and speak in role. They like the opportunities to do independent research using information and communication technology, and practical exercises such as piecing together a poem presented in lines or sections. Students particularly enjoy the cross-curricular 'Space' module in Year 7.
- The current schemes of work are suitably broad and cover all areas of skills. They are being adjusted to reflect national guidance at Key Stage 3. At Key Stage 4, in response to the need to improve results in English language, good changes have been made to the entry policy for English language and literature and there is increased provision for additional support and more exam practice.

- The single-sex groups for higher ability students in Years 9 to 11 are popular with boys and girls and effective in promoting discussion and debate.
- The popular paired-reading programme enables younger students with lower reading scores to develop their confidence in reading. The regular library sessions and use of reading journals successfully encourage reading for pleasure. Poetry events and theatre visits enrich the curriculum.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management are satisfactory.

- The assessment and monitoring of students' progress in English last year was not sufficiently rigorous to identify potential underachievement in GCSE English language. Effective action has been taken to analyse weaknesses in performance including: the better use of data and assessment; closer monitoring of coursework; and improved consistency of additional support for students. However, it is too early to assess the impact of these well-planned measures.
- Local Authority English consultants have provided good support in enabling faculty leaders to understand strengths and weaknesses with more precision and detail. Target-setting is realistic and challenging for students in all year groups.
- Strategies for reversing the decline in attainment in English language are in place and there is strong commitment by leaders at all levels to improve student outcomes.

Subject issue: the teaching of spelling and handwriting

There is a planned spelling programme in Years 7 and 8 which teaches patterns and tests spelling. Teachers regularly correct spelling in their marking. Students with dyslexia are supported well in their spelling and writing skills in the additional resource centre for specific special educational needs and/or disabilities. Lower ability students, taught by staff from this unit, develop confidence in spelling through multi-sensory approaches and the use of synthetic phonics.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising achievement, especially of middle and higher ability students, by:
 - closer and more frequent monitoring of progress to ensure that students meet their targets
 - improving the use of lesson objectives and the planning of lessons so that the sequence of activity is coherent and directed towards a clear learning outcome
 - making more effective use of plenaries to summarise learning outcomes in lessons
 - evaluating the impact of departmental strategies to prevent underachievement.

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 available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Bernard Campbell
Her Majesty's Inspector