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Mr B Parker
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Dear Mr Parker

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 eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is outstanding.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- Standards on entry are well below average. They remain below average at the end of Year 11, but in recent years have improved at a secure and accelerating rate. Standards observed in reading, writing, speaking and listening showed that this is a continuing trend.
- Progress in lessons and in English GCSE examinations is outstanding. Roughly 40% of the students have special educational needs and/or disabilities and a similar proportion does not have English as a first language. These groups make exceptional progress. However, students make better progress in Years 10 and 11 than they do at Key Stage 3.

- Behaviour is excellent and attitudes to learning are exemplary. Students respond well to excellent teaching and the outstanding curriculum.
- Students work hard in lessons, read avidly and join in discussions readily. They enjoy visits to theatres and the excellent opportunities to meet authors and participate in international writing events provided by the vibrant school library.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is outstanding.

- Excellent questioning probes students' understanding so that they have the confidence to take it to a higher level. Focused class discussions with short periods of reflection enable them to improve their skills.
- Lessons are paced well and contain a good variety of tasks so that the rate of learning is sustained throughout.
- Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities are supported excellently so that they are given the confidence, ambition and aspiration to excel.
- Although lesson planning is good, it does not always provide enough different tasks effectively for particular groups of students.
- Accurate assessment is used excellently to modify medium-term planning so that it responds to the identified needs of classes and cohorts. Teachers skilfully enable students to assess their progress in lessons. However, day-to-day marking is stronger at Key Stage 4 than at Key Stage 3, where it does not: consistently focus on the learning intentions of the lessons; state precisely what has been achieved; or explain what the students should do to improve their standards.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the English curriculum is outstanding.

- The National Curriculum is covered with excellent attention to providing the full range of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Progression and assessment are mapped carefully across all year groups. Coupled with excellent teaching, this ensures that students of all abilities and backgrounds are enthusiastic about English.
- Schemes of work are established well in Key Stage 4. The current revisions at Key Stage 3 provide a firm foundation for improving progress. The department handbook contains excellent advice and guidance on teaching approaches.
- Provision for particular groups of students is excellent. It is superb for those who are below national expectations when they enter the school. New arrangements for those whose first language is not English are having a positive impact on their achievement. Provision for gifted and talented students is not embedded so well, but plans are well conceived and more students are gaining the higher grades in English GCSE.

- The curriculum in English is enhanced by excellent provision for improving literacy and the events organised by the busy school library.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

The leadership and management of English are outstanding.

- The relatively new head of department has accurately identified areas for improvement in English and taken appropriate and effective action. Strategic planning is ambitious and rigorous with a relentless focus on achievement, which is improving rapidly.
- The head of department is ably supported by a strong and cohesive team, some of whom take responsibility well for particular aspects of English. The team is self-critical and dedicated to empowering students to achieve the highest possible standards. The capacity for further improvement is outstanding.

Subject issue: Spelling and handwriting

- The department has a clear policy of requiring students to use handwriting for much of their written work, ensuring that they have constant practice at writing legibly and at speed. However, the presentation of students' work is sometimes messy, particularly at Key Stage 3.
- Spellings are corrected in marking, although this is inconsistent. There is some testing of spelling, but there is no coherent strategy for improving it across the department. Other aspects of writing have been tackled well, leading to higher standards overall.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving progress at Key Stage 3 by:
 - establishing a new marking policy which states what has been achieved and gives advice on how to improve work
 - making sure that lesson plans provide different tasks when appropriate for students with different starting points
 - improving the presentation of students' written 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/local Learning & Skills Council and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Harrett
Her Majesty's Inspector