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Dr P McGovern
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Dear Dr McGovern

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 10 and 11 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 good.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- Attainment in English on entry to the school is average with some variation between year groups. At the end of Year 11, attainment in English is above average with a trend of improvement over time. Students make good progress in English GCSE, particularly in terms of the proportion achieving grade C or above. However, some students do not achieve the high grades of which they are capable.
- Attainment is above average in English literature and media studies. In these subjects, all students make good progress in their learning.

- Thorough assessments at the end of Year 9 in 2009 showed that students had made better progress across Key Stage 3 than in previous years and that the progress of all groups was good.
- In the sixth form, attainment is above average in English, media studies and film studies. There is some variation in progress in different years, particularly in English, but it is good overall.
- Attainment and progress observed during the visit were similar to those in examinations with no difference between reading and writing. Attainment in speaking and listening is high and the students make excellent progress.
- Students speak highly of their work in English. They enjoy their lessons, behave well and have good attitudes to learning.

Quality of teaching in English

Teaching in English is good.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge, and use this well to clarify the students' understanding of work. They have excellent relationships with students who speak confidently and well in discussions.
- In the very best practice, teachers skilfully organise activities to ensure that all students are fully involved in their learning and use challenging questioning to make sure that their progress is rapid and secure. In these lessons, particular attention is given to the starting points and learning needs of individual students.
- The quality of whole-class teaching is a strength of the department. However, sometimes this approach is relied on too much and opportunities are missed to provide focused activities for particular groups. This adversely affects the progress of more able students and sometimes leads teachers to provide too much explanation rather than giving students opportunities to tackle problems for themselves.
- Good assessment in lessons enables students to reflect on their learning productively. Marking in Key Stage 4 is thorough and helpful, enabling students to identify strengths and areas for development in their work. It is less consistent at Key Stage 3. Assessment information is not used sufficiently in lesson planning to provide for all groups of students, particularly the more able.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The curriculum in English is good.

- The curriculum at Key Stage 3 meets requirements. Recent modifications provide well for engagement and assessment.
- The Key Stage 4 curriculum provides students with an excellent range of choices. They fully appreciate the opportunity to choose between English literature, media studies and film studies.

- In the sixth form, the choice is similarly broad, with the department offering popular courses at A level in English language and literature, English literature, media studies and film studies.
- There are good links with other departments, such as history and art, and a sound programme of trips and visits. However, students reported that they would appreciate more opportunities to work with writers in school.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

The quality of leadership and management in English is good

- Departmental leadership has a clear and ambitious vision for the development of English. Strategic planning is good. Although monitoring and evaluation are sound, there is insufficient attention to monitoring the progress of groups of students, particularly the more able.
- Effective subject leadership is provided across Key Stages 3 and 4.
- Recent improvements in several areas of English show that the capacity to improve is good.

Spelling and handwriting

The school and department provide targeted and effective support for those identified as having particular problems with spelling. The department corrects spellings in written work and uses a range of strategies to help students to improve in this area. Work is presented well in English throughout the school. Students write neatly and understand the link between good presentation and achievement.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising the achievement of the more able in English by:
 - using assessment in all year groups to identify more able students
 - planning lessons so that activities are focused appropriately on the different starting points of the students
 - ensuring that monitoring and evaluation in all year groups takes account of the progress made by more able students.

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

Andrew Harrett
Her Majesty's Inspector