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30 November 2009

Mrs J Dyer
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Dear Mrs Dyer

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 11 and 12 November 2009 to look at work in English.

As outlined in our initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular 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 students and staff, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of 15 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of the subject is good.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- Standards are average when students enter Year 7 and above average by the end of Year 11 in English and English literature. This marks a clear improvement from a period in which outcomes have been broadly average. Students now make much better progress and the attainment of boys is close to that of girls.
- In lessons observed, students made mostly good gains in understanding. Effective assessment, well-designed opportunities for learning independently and an increasingly challenging and interesting curriculum

support their learning. As a result, they acquire the knowledge and skills needed to meet their targets.

- Students are well-motivated, work effectively with each other and discuss sensitive issues thoughtfully. Rarely, when teaching is less effective, a few students engage less well, and these are more often boys than girls.

Quality of teaching of English

The quality of teaching of English is good.

- The quality of teaching observed was more often good than satisfactory. Teachers have high expectations and most understand well how to overcome the difficulties students face. Lesson activities are varied, practical and usually help students think and talk in ways which build their understanding. This has a particularly positive effect on boys' progress. In a minority of lessons, such activities are less confidently led. Students then fail to grasp what is expected of them and gain less from opportunities to use spoken or written language.
- The English department is making good use of the Teacher Effectiveness Enhancement Programme to improve teaching. Teachers typically set an introductory task to promote thinking and discussion before introducing the learning objectives. In the best lessons seen, teachers very skilfully led students to talk about their understanding and used this as a basis for new learning. A coherent sequence of activities then helped students to consolidate and extend their learning, before they reviewed what they had learned.
- Students' progress is monitored carefully and discussed with them so that they are clear about what they need to do to improve.

Quality of the English curriculum

The quality of the English curriculum is satisfactory and improving.

- The school offers a widening range of courses to meet students' different needs. Nearly all are entered for both English language and English literature GCSE, and qualifications in drama and media are available. The curriculum for Years 7, 8 and 9 is being refreshed and includes some interesting texts and creative projects which appeal to both girls and boys.
- Strong support and guidance, including intensive revision sessions to prepare for examinations, have helped to accelerate progress recently. Currently, a small number of Year 11 students are entered for GCSE English earlier than usual to allow them to move on to higher level work or re-sit the GCSE examination later in Year 11 to improve their initial grades.
- The schemes of work provide teachers with suitable resources to cover the necessary range of knowledge and skills. However, guidance on effective teaching approaches is limited.
- Teachers make extensive use of new technology to stimulate thinking, but opportunities to model shared writing are sometimes missed.

Effectiveness of leadership and management of English

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of English is good.

- The English department has improved well in the past year. A significant contribution has been made by whole-school improvement in the culture of learning and behaviour and the use of challenging performance targets and monitoring of students' progress to tackle underachievement. Under new leadership, the English team has a clear sense of direction.
- Modern Languages specialist status has played a minor part in improving English. Teachers have been trained to use their laptops and projectors and use a set of workstations linked to the internet.
- The department knows its strengths and weaknesses well and has a good capacity to improve further. The improvement plan is based securely on monitoring and evaluation by the senior leaders and the head of English. Lesson observations highlight variations in the effectiveness of teaching, but follow-up has not always led to rapid improvement.

Spelling and handwriting.

Although schemes of work for Key Stage 3 include objectives for spelling, they do not always indicate clearly enough how these can be taught. There were examples of the positive impact on students, with particular problems in these areas, resulting from consistent support by English and special educational needs and/or disabilities teachers. For more average students, the amount of guidance about how to improve spelling or handwriting varied. Marking and individual feedback too often had little positive effect on their work.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- developing teachers' expertise in using teaching approaches that promote students' understanding
- ensuring that monitoring and evaluation leads to good practice being shared more effectively.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop English in the school. As explained in our 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

Susan Bowles
Her Majesty's Inspector