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Dear Mr McAuley

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 16 and 17 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 seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is satisfactory.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is satisfactory.

- Attainment at GCSE is low compared with the national average, reflecting a legacy of underachievement in previous years in Key Stage 3. However, there are signs of improving attainment and progress. A higher proportion of students in Year 11 and Year 10 is on course for obtaining a pass at grade C or above than in recent years. Students make satisfactory progress in Key Stage 4.

- Attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 rose significantly in 2009 to reach a broadly average level. The students who are now in Year 10 made good progress in Key Stage 3.
- Only small numbers of students study English in the sixth form and attainment varies from year to year. Students' progress in the sixth form, from a wide range of starting points, is generally satisfactory.
- In the lessons seen, the quality of students' learning varied considerably. At best, students were enthused by imaginative tasks and worked with a good degree of independence and determination to meet their teachers' high expectations. Most students were well-behaved and cooperative but, in a few lessons with lower-attaining students, the pace of learning was slowed by inattentiveness and demanding behaviour on the part of some students.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching of English is satisfactory.

- Teaching in the lessons observed varied from outstanding to satisfactory.
- The more effective lessons were well-focused and challenged students to aim high. They included a good variety of activities, which students enjoyed, and moved along at a brisk pace. The most successful teaching was founded on excellent relationships and the teacher's deep knowledge of the subject, combined with skilful questioning to push students' thinking on.
- There were two key shortcomings in the lessons where teaching was not so effective. Firstly, the pace of learning was slower. This was sometimes because managing the behaviour of some students interrupted the flow of the lesson. Secondly, work was not always matched closely enough to the students' ability.
- The quality and effectiveness of day-to-day assessment and the marking of students' work are not consistent enough across the department. Some marking, notably in Key Stage 4, is detailed and precise. Students say they find this 'in-depth feedback' on their work invaluable. The usefulness of marking is more varied in Key Stage 3 where some, though noting shortcomings, does little to help students know how to improve their work.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the English curriculum is good.

- The curriculum covers all that is required with good attention to drama and media. Students have good opportunities to perform.
- The curriculum has improved this year. Almost all students in Key Stage 4 are now taking the English Literature GCSE course. English Language has been introduced as an A-level option and is proving popular.

- There is a satisfactory range of activities beyond lessons, such as theatre visits and a writing club. Interventions to support students in Key Stage 4 are well-focused on individuals' particular needs. Support for students with significant special educational needs and/or disabilities is good.
- There are some good links between English and other subjects, for example the production of an e-newspaper to contribute to the school's Engineering Week. The use and development of literacy skills across the curriculum are promoted but not yet embedded in all subjects.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

The effectiveness of leadership and management of English is good.

- There is an evident drive for improvement which is supported by all teachers. Recent improvements in attainment confirm the effectiveness of leadership and management of the subject. The quality of weaker teaching has been improved.
- The school's senior leaders take a keen and supportive interest in the department's work and evaluate its effectiveness accurately. As a member of the senior team, the head of English has a good view of the place of English within the priorities of whole-school planning for improvement.
- In Key Stage 4, the monitoring of students' progress and evaluation of strengths and weaknesses in their work are rigorous and effective. However, in Key Stage 3, although students' work is assessed regularly, monitoring and evaluation of attainment and progress are less well-developed.
- Plans for further development of the subject show a good understanding of priorities and emphasise raising attainment, with challenging targets set for students' progress.

Spelling and handwriting

Standards of spelling and handwriting are broadly average. The school does not have policies for the teaching of these aspects of the subject. Teachers mark spelling errors but do not always correct them or require students to do so. Where weak spelling or handwriting are noted, the student is urged to improve matters but not necessarily given guidance or support to do so.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- building on recent improvements in students' progress to raise attainment
- improving teaching so that more is of a good or better quality, in particular by:
 - managing students' behaviour more effectively, especially in some lower sets
 - ensuring that marking makes it clear to students how to improve their work

- introducing more rigorous checking of students' progress in Key Stage 3.

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. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half term and made available to the team for the next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Pat Kime
Her Majesty's Inspector