

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



18 March 2010

Mr J Foster
Headteacher
St Mary's Catholic Comprehensive School
Benton Park Road
Newcastle upon Tyne
Tyne and Wear
NE7 7PE

Dear Mr Foster

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 9 and 10 February 2010 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 provision for gifted and talented students in English.

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.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of 10 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is outstanding.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- Students' progress has improved rapidly over the past four years. In 2009, students' GCSE results demonstrated exceptionally strong progress and there are clear indications that Year 11 students are making even better progress this year.
- Standards in GCSE English and Literature have risen, even though more students have started at lower levels in recent years. In 2009, results were in line with national outcomes. The numbers achieving grades A and A*

have increased. Inspection evidence indicates that the improvement continues and is gathering strength currently.

- Students in the sixth form attain the results in English Language and English Literature which would be expected given their GCSE grades.
- All groups of students make clearly positive progress in lessons and are enthusiastic about English. The effective focus on individual needs has reduced the gaps between boys and girls and for groups of students who start with weaker literacy or who are eligible for free school meals.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is outstanding.

- Students' strong involvement in learning and excellent progress results from teaching which is routinely good and often outstanding. The team of English teachers includes a good range of expertise and shares a passion for teaching the subject well.
- The team uses assessment very well to diagnose what students need to learn. A key development has been the refinement of learning objectives based on students' progress. In the best cases, teachers use sharply focused objectives very well to shape a coherent sequence of learning. These lessons include very good opportunities for students to practise new skills independently and to review what they have achieved.
- Lessons are fun and students say they 'make you think'. Teachers gain students' interest through relevant activities which make good use of resources. Teachers generally keep explanations clear and brief, so that students are quickly involved in doing something challenging for themselves.
- Relationships are strong and questions are skilful. Teachers often target particular students and listen well to their contributions, drawing out their ideas and overcoming obstacles to understanding.
- Whatever their level of attainment, students value the consistently good support they receive to meet their personal targets. Marking corrects errors, gives specific guidance and comments on achievements in reading and speaking as well as writing. This is particularly helpful to the students at a more advanced level of learning English as a second language.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The curriculum in English is good.

- Nearly all students take GCSE in English and English Literature. Drama is available as an option and reasonable numbers of students progress to sixth-form courses in English Language and English Literature.
- The curriculum offers good balance. Strengths include enjoyable approaches to poetry and a focus on understanding the plays of Shakespeare as drama.

- Within a balanced scheme, teachers show flair in tailoring their plans to reflect the needs and interests of students. The clear assessment systems help them to evaluate the impact of their plans, and they continuously develop the curriculum together.
- English plays a leading role in the school's humanities specialism, and this is contributing to the development of a more integrated curriculum for Key Stage 3.
- A good variety of enrichment activities complements classroom work. For example, writing competitions and the Book Club have fostered interest in independent reading and talent in writing. Workshops led by visiting specialists have had a positive effect on the aspirations and confidence of students, and encouraged teachers to try new approaches.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are outstanding.

- The subject leader has worked closely with senior colleagues to reach demanding targets for all learners, with conspicuous success. This creates a very clear sense of direction which is well complemented by the ability to use a wide range of information to identify areas for improvement and good skills to effect change. The capacity to improve further is evident.
- The linked member of the senior team provides valuable support for monitoring and review. Teachers are reflective and keen to learn; they make the most of regular feedback and opportunities to observe each other, and meet to review and plan together. Teachers make a valuable contribution to the evolving schemes of work and good practice is shared well across the department.
- As a result, teachers share a clear understanding of selected strategies. Despite some unavoidable absences from the team, performance has steadily improved and morale is high.

Subject issue: provision for gifted and talented students in English

The department's provision for gifted and talented students is aligned well with its policies to match teaching and learning more closely with individual needs. Such students are clearly identified through assessment and observation by the department. The department has considered carefully how to maximise the progress of gifted students. High targets are set and are increasingly being met, because lessons are being planned better to meet their needs. The students have enjoyed and benefited from targeted enrichment activities. Students are given time in class and homework to extend independently what they have learned. Marking makes use of high level criteria and explains what these students need to do to reach them.

Areas for improvement

The school has clear plans to raise standards in English further and requires no further recommendations.

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

As I explained in previously, 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