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Ms C Sydenham
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Sydenham

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 8 and 9 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 six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is outstanding.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- Attainment on entry is broadly average. By the end of Year 11, attainment in English is above average and showing yearly improvement. In the sixth form, attainment is above average.
- All groups of students, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities and those from minority ethnic backgrounds, make good progress in speaking, listening, reading and writing. In the sixth form, progress is outstanding.

- Students enjoy their learning and behave exceptionally well. They respond well to the interesting activities in lessons and the excellent range of activities provided by the department.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Teachers have high expectations of all students. They organise activities so that all are confident that their contributions will be valued. They use a range of whole-class, group and independent learning activities in lessons, which ensures that they are brisk and purposeful. Clear objectives provide a focus for learning.
- Teachers have excellent subject knowledge which informs their teaching throughout the school. This was particularly noteworthy in the lessons observed in the sixth form.
- In the best practice, excellent questioning techniques probe students' understanding, helping them to clarify their thinking and challenging them to extend their skills and knowledge.
- Assessment is good, with opportunities in lessons for students to reflect on their own learning and that of their peers. Marking is detailed and clearly sets out what students have achieved and how they should improve their work. Students report that this helps them to gauge their progress.
- Occasionally, the pace of lessons is slowed down by too much explanation and intervention by teachers, preventing students from getting fully engaged in their learning.
- More able students reported that the pace of learning is sometimes too slow for them and that occasionally other students rely too much on them.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The curriculum in English is outstanding.

- The department constantly reviews and refines the curriculum in all year groups to ensure that it engages students and enables them to achieve well. The department is developing new units of work at Key Stage 3 which will help students and teachers to monitor progress accurately. Interesting content and activities provide an excellent foundation for further improving achievement.
- At Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form, the department carefully researches the options available for examination courses, devising units of work which match requirements excellently. Courses at A level are popular.
- The department has well-established and productive links with other subjects in the school. The excellent range of trips and activities, covering all aspects of English and available to all students, is exemplary.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are outstanding.

- The head of department has built an excellent team of well-qualified, skilled and committed teachers who are determined to provide the best education possible, and are constantly seeking ways to improve provision further. Morale is high. Effective collaboration ensures that the strengths of the department are sustained and improved.
- Detailed and accurate evaluation ensures that planning is effective in driving up achievement. The successful focus on teaching, assessment and the curriculum demonstrates that the capacity for sustained improvement is excellent. Students regard English as a lead department in the school.

Provision for gifted and talented students in English

- The department has clear policies for gifted and talented (GT) students and identifies them well. Provision in classrooms and through extra activities meets their needs. The excellent range of activities provided for all students is appreciated by GT students who also benefit from some designed specifically for them.
- Accurate knowledge of all students' ability ensures that GT students, in common with their peers, make good progress in their learning.
- The department is ambitious for GT students, seeking ways to ensure that opportunities in school and in their future life reflect their ability.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- making further improvements to group work by targeting the particular needs of the more able students more frequently and directly.

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

As I explained 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

Andrew Harrett
Her Majesty's Inspector