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22 March 2010

Mr J Hallworth
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Hallworth

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 10 and 11 March 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 eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is good.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- Attainment is now broadly average. In the last two years, there has been a clear upward trend in attainment at GCSE. In 2009, the Year 11 students' attainment, though improved, was significantly below average. However, for this year's cohort, the results from early entry at GCSE already show a higher percentage of students obtaining grades A* to C. The proportion reaching the highest grades has almost doubled.
- The great majority of students make at least good progress from a well below average starting point when they join the school in Year 7.

- Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities generally make good progress and there are examples of very rapid progress for some of these students, particularly in reading in Key Stage 3. Students for whom English is not the home language and those who are at an early stage of learning English make good progress and are represented well in the upper sets.
- Students' learning is supported well by their positive attitudes to learning and the school's ethos of high expectations.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Good teaching is the key factor in students' good progress. Typically, relationships with students are very positive and staff maintain a well-ordered, purposeful atmosphere in lessons. Teachers have good knowledge of their subject.
- In almost all the lessons observed, expectations were high and resources were normally used effectively to interest students and to support their learning.
- Assessment is good overall but not of a consistent quality. In the most effective teaching seen, the teacher checked students' learning very skilfully throughout the lesson and adjusted the planned work accordingly. The effectiveness of the marking of students' work and the systems for setting targets for their learning vary between classes.
- When any shortcomings were seen in teaching, they related mainly to a slower pace and the extent to which all students were actively involved.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The curriculum in English is good.

- The curriculum is planned carefully to assure progression in students' learning and it is kept under review. The recently revised curricular planning for Years 7 and 8 is good. Speaking and listening, information and communication technology, and links with the school's specialism are integral to these plans.
- There is a good range of additional provision for particular groups of students. These interventions are aimed mainly at the lower attainers in Key Stage 3 and students in Key Stage 4 who might, with an extra push, obtain a grade A to C at GCSE.
- Enrichment of the curriculum, for example with visits, visitors, and extra-curricular clubs, is satisfactory but not extensive.
- Students are encouraged to read, including in library lessons. Nonetheless, guidance for their wider independent reading is limited.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are good.

- Subject staff and the senior leadership team show determination to continue improving students' achievement and the quality of provision. The enhanced teamwork in the department and the improvements already seen show that they have the capacity to do so.
- The department's evaluation of its performance and plans for development are well judged.
- Staff keep close track of students' progress towards their targets and, where progress is rapid, the expectations for individuals are raised. It is not always easy, however, for staff to identify the few students whose progress, from their starting point in Year 7, is not sufficient.

Provision for gifted and talented students in English

The school has a clear policy for identifying students who may be gifted or talented in English and the arrangements for teaching students in ability sets, combined with the good teaching, mean these students' needs are met well in lessons. The increased proportion of students working at a high level in Year 11 is indicative of how well gifted and talented students achieve at Thornhill. They develop a good depth of understanding, for example of the themes behind the content of books and poems. These students have planned opportunities to exercise responsibility and work with a good degree of independence. However, the range of enrichment activities catering for their particular needs is somewhat limited.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- enhancing the effectiveness and consistency of the marking of students' work and the use of assessment in lessons and at departmental level
- further improving the curriculum by the provision of more enrichment activities and more structured guidance for students' wider independent reading.

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

Pat Kime
Her Majesty's Inspector