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Mr S Barber
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Dear Mr Barber

Ofsted 2009–10 subject survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 26 and 27 January 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 (GT) 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 nine lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is good.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- Attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form is average, showing a sustained upward trend. Relatively few students gain high grades, but early entry allows some to improve their GCSE grade in Year 11 and others to focus on English Literature. Over a third of the current Year 11 already has GCSE English at grade C or higher. The requirements for entry to AS courses have been made more demanding so that students undertake courses for which they are suited.

- Given students' generally low starting points, results at GCSE and in the sixth form represent good progress. Improvement over the past three years has been significantly better than the national average.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Among the strengths observed were confident and engaging subject knowledge, activities to suit different abilities and styles of learning, well-organised planning, generally well-deployed questioning skills and good use of technology. Teachers instilled a real enthusiasm for the subject in students across the age and ability range.
- Lesson planning was detailed and well balanced although, occasionally, activities were not well matched to students' ability to tackle an extended task effectively. Students were happy to present work for peer review and to reflect sensibly on what they had learnt and where they still had difficulties. Teachers were quick to praise and ensured that students understood their current level and had clear and manageable personal targets; however, they did not regularly ask 'Why?' to extend thinking, both in class and in written work.
- Students were receptive and responsive but not generally independent learners. Listening and writing skills were not as well developed as those in speaking and reading, especially in Years 7 to 9.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The curriculum in English is good.

- In Years 7 to 9 there is thorough coverage of National Curriculum requirements. Teachers are encouraged to adapt schemes of work and resources to suit particular classes. The curriculum enables all groups of students to make similar rates of progress. The choice of texts and topics successfully engages boys' interest and sustains their motivation. Many now read for pleasure, with the library a very popular resource.
- Key Stage 4 and sixth form students are well catered for, including those for whom GCSE is not an appropriate option. This enables all to progress towards a nationally accredited qualification.
- Older students, especially the more able, spoke enthusiastically about theatre trips, film and drama workshops and opportunities to develop public speaking skills.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are good.

- The new head of English has a clear understanding of current strengths and of challenges that include establishing a shared and mutually supportive ethos. Sharp analysis by the senior leadership of students'

attainment and progress over the past year has driven up standards and set ambitious targets. These provide a strong foundation for current planning. Monitoring of teaching and learning is thorough and perceptive and sensibly shapes teachers' professional development.

- Strong leadership, realistic self-evaluation and the significant impact of recent strategies on attainment and progress indicate that capacity for further improvement is outstanding.

Provision for gifted and talented pupils/students in English

- Gifted and talented students appreciate the choice of texts and approach to discussion and writing presented to them. They also enjoy the extra-curricular programme. As one student observed: 'It does push you out to explore things and opens up a cultural thirst.'

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- developing students as independent and effective learners by:
 - making assessment more challenging and developmental, both in class and in the marking of written work
 - ensuring that planning is precise and practical about the learning opportunities in each activity
 - strengthening students' listening and writing skills
- disseminating and embedding best practice by:
 - ensuring that teaching is underpinned by shared and consistently applied priorities and practices.

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/local Learning and Skills Council and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Patricia Metham
Her Majesty's Inspector