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Dear Mr Beaumont

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 22 and 23 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 nine lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is good with some outstanding features.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- Standards in English have been broadly average at the end of Key Stage 4 in recent years. However, the GCSE English Language results in 2009 were the best ever and represented above average standards. Results in GCSE English Literature were similarly impressive given the very high level of entry. The department's rigorous monitoring of current progress, including evidence from the early entry GCSE results, suggests that this upward trend in attainment will be at least maintained in 2010.
- Contextual value-added data suggest that progress has been broadly satisfactory in recent years but was good in 2009. The gap in performance between girls and boys has narrowed substantially in the past two years.

The more able students and some students with special educational needs and/or disabilities make especially good progress.

- Progress in lessons observed was good. Students behave well, are keen to learn and collaborate effectively in group work.
- Standards in Advanced level courses are broadly average with a 100% pass rate in recent years. Progress varies from year to year but is generally good overall.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good with some outstanding features.

- Teaching observed was consistently good; this was reinforced in discussion with students. Students were very positive about the department praising teachers' enthusiasm and energy, the range and variety of lessons, and the support provided for individual students.
- There were many strengths to the lessons observed including: very good relationships, the use of lively activities that engaged students, good teacher modelling of both writing and speaking, and success in meeting the needs of all students in the mixed-ability groups.
- The progress made by students within lessons was sometimes constrained by learning objectives that were over-complex or too broad. This meant that lessons did not always have sufficient clarity of purpose and potentially lively activities did not have enough impact on students' learning.
- Students spoke about the 'constructive and helpful' marking by teachers. Some assessment practice is of very high quality. Books are often marked in tremendous detail and the best marking is very clear about how students can improve their work. There is consistent use of individual targets for students that are reviewed on a regular basis and all students are very clear about the assessment criteria. However, the work sample also suggested that too little emphasis is currently placed on using marking to improve students' spelling.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The curriculum in English is good with some outstanding features.

- The curriculum is very inclusive. This is reflected in the department's commitment to mixed-ability teaching, the positive response of most students to English, and the high level of support provided to all students across the ability range.
- There are some innovative elements to the Key Stage 3 curriculum. Assessment is well integrated and there are creative units such as the public speaking unit in Year 8 and the transition unit in Year 7. The department is committed to promoting students' wider reading. At present, information and communication technology, including moving image work, is underrepresented in the programme but there are plans to extend these aspects of English.

- Very good additional support is provided for students who need it. This includes initiatives for lower attaining students such as the Literacy Plus programme and the Reading Club, as well as activities targeted at more able students. Considerable additional help is provided for all students outside lessons to improve their grades in Year 9 and Key Stage 4.
- Enrichment activities enhance the English programme substantially. This includes a good range of activities that supports and encourages reading, as well as theatre trips, drama workshops, and visits by writers.
- There is a considerable emphasis on exploring assessment criteria with students in all years. This is helpful and much appreciated by students. However, students also need to be aware that there are audiences for their work beyond the examiners and opportunities should be explored to extend the range of purposes and audiences for English work beyond the school.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are outstanding.

- The department has a clear and very strong statement of its principles and this provides good direction to the work of the department. Communication is very good and good practice is shared well. Teachers work very well together and praise the strength of team work in English.
- Leadership responsibilities are delegated very well, enabling different teachers to take responsibility for key areas of the department's work. Teachers work together in a range of mini-teams on particular projects.
- Departmental leadership has a good understanding of where practice can be improved further. For example, some dissatisfaction with recent sixth-form results led to the appointment of a Key Stage 5 coordinator and the introduction of approaches, such as close monitoring of progress, that have proved to be successful elsewhere. The departmental improvement plan identifies an accurate range of priorities including a good emphasis on further developments in teaching.
- Monitoring and evaluation are thorough and include recent reviews by members of the senior leadership team, as well as regular lesson observations by the head of the department. This has led to good feedback on performance although lesson observations sometimes lack detailed comment on the impact of teaching on students' progress in lessons. There are good, supportive links with the senior leadership team.

Provision for gifted and talented students in English

Gifted and talented students enjoy English and agree that lessons are effective in challenging them to achieve even more highly. Marking gives them very good feedback on their work and teachers know students well enough to intervene and advise at key moments. There is a good variety of activities aimed at gifted and talented students including writing workshops and the sixth-form newspaper. More able students achieve highly in English.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving progress within individual lessons through the more effective use of clear learning objectives that provide direction to lessons and help teachers to choose activities that contribute directly to students' learning.

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

Philip Jarrett
Her Majesty's Inspector