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Mr M Anderson
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Anderson

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 15 and 16 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 12 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is satisfactory and improving.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is satisfactory.

- Standards have been broadly average in GCSE English Language and English Literature over recent years and remain so in the current Year 11.
- Overall progress is satisfactory. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities and those who enter the school with below the expected levels in English make good progress. Girls make better progress than boys, especially in reaching GCSE grade C or above. Too few higher ability boys and girls consistently achieve the very highest grades.
- At Key Stage 3, the school's detailed records show an increase in the numbers of students on track to achieve their targets. In the sixth form,

recent English Literature results have been below average. Standards are above average and progress is good on the new combined English Literature and English Language course (ELLA).

- Progress in lessons is satisfactory. Students are usually attentive and work steadily. In the better lessons, they work with greater independence and confidence.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is satisfactory.

- The teachers' specialist subject knowledge ensures a thorough coverage of syllabus and examination requirements. Good rapport between the teachers and students usually establishes a positive working atmosphere.
- The use of assessment is good. The accurate and informative marking of work provides clear guidance on how to improve. In GCSE lessons, teachers make frequent and explicit use of grade criteria which the students use effectively to guide their planning and writing.
- Teaching methods lack variety and do not offer enough opportunities for students to engage more actively in their learning. There is not enough use of pair and group work to improve the students' reasoning skills. Teachers tend to monopolise whole-class question and answer sessions and do not always challenge the students enough to elaborate on each other's responses.
- The students value the teachers' guidance to improve their work. They also correctly note that opportunities to use information and communication technology are not consistent.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The curriculum in English is good

- The new subject leader's incisive focus on curriculum development at Key Stage 3 has led to substantial revision of schemes of work. There is good breadth in the texts and the topics. Activities are tightly cross-referenced to key assessment focuses. The ensuing assignments provide good opportunities for extended writing responses.
- At Key Stage 4, the recent introduction of GCSE media studies gives more students the chance to gain a second GCSE in an English-related subject. The faculty's links with drama staff are raising the standards of speaking and listening of GCSE students, so making good use of the school's specialism.
- In the sixth form, rigorous planning has led to the successful introduction of the new ELLA course. Recruitment and retention levels are good.
- There is a sound range of extra-curricular opportunities including educational visits and a book club. Year 11 students speak positively about the value of the after-school revision club.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are good.

- You and the governing body gave high priority to the appointment of a skilled subject leader for English. The new leader's impact is clear in the improved curriculum, good use of assessment and in her strategic approach to raising standards. She is also a strong teacher who demonstrates the range of teaching styles that the faculty needs to develop.
- The subject leader has accurately analysed data to identify what needs to improve. Her improvement planning is very specific and thorough. Her analysis of the quality of teaching is accurate, but relatively limited time for lesson observations restricts her opportunities to improve teaching.

Provision for gifted and talented students in English

The faculty is in the process of evaluating schemes of work at Key Stage 3 to sharpen the provision for gifted and talented students. Guidance provided by the school's gifted and talented coordinator has yet to impact on teaching. The faculty has arranged professional support for teachers aimed at achieving more grades at GCSE A* or A.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising standards in English by:
 - extending the variety of teaching methods to encourage more independent learning
 - ensuring tasks challenge the higher attaining students to enable them to achieve better outcomes
 - increasing the opportunities for the subject leader to monitor lessons to support improvements in teaching.

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 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

Chris Griffin
Additional Inspector