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Mr G Allen
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Dear Mr Allen

Ofsted 2011–12 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 May 2011 to look at work 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 without their consent.

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, including joint observations with senior staff.

The overall effectiveness of English is good.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- While attainment in the subject was well below average in the past three years, due to fewer students than average attaining higher GCSE grades, the college's data indicate that current students are on track to achieve results that are above average.
- This improvement is due to better teaching and learning that particularly engage boys in the subject, and in the use of more challenging targets to enable more students to reach A* and A grades at GCSE. All students know their target levels or grades and how to improve their work in order to reach the targets.

- Over the past three years, students' progress was inadequate. It is now good, due to improved monitoring of students' progress towards their challenging targets, and a focus on developing reading skills. Boys make less progress than girls but the department is closing the gap. Boys say that they prefer the recently introduced approach to investigating and interpreting the meaning of texts and the new approach to writing.
- The quality of students' learning is good. Most students enjoy their lessons and all students display positive attitudes to learning and good behaviour.
- The attainment of sixth form students is average, although it is better in English language than in English literature. While the quality of students' learning and progress in the sixth form is satisfactory, there remain too few opportunities to develop independent learning skills.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- The key, characteristic strengths of teaching in Key Stages 3 and 4 are: well-structured lessons and variety of tasks; effective use of resources; opportunities to apply skills independently following modelling of the skills by the teacher; engagement of students in peer- and self-assessment; and regular marking that informs students how to improve their work. The 'Assessing Pupil Progress' guidelines are raising expectations of students at Key Stage 3.
- Students say that they feel engaged in the majority of lessons. When asked what makes a good lesson, students in Key Stage 3 listed the following features: 'a charismatic teacher who is not dull, role play, not being rushed and given more than two minutes to write, activities such as debating to make persuasive writing come alive, and visual aids such as films or media presentations'.
- Common weaknesses in teaching that limit students' progress are insufficient use of higher target grades to challenge individual students in lessons, particularly more able students.
- The quality of teaching and learning in A-level classes is satisfactory, although discussion tends to be over-led by the teacher.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum in English is good.

- The English curriculum is sufficiently broad and balanced to cover the different areas well. It includes media, role play and, to a lesser extent, information and communication technology.
- The curriculum is planned creatively to meet the needs of students and includes intervention programmes for those who are underachieving.
- Schemes of work in Year 9 are being revised appropriately in relation to the review of the National Curriculum.
- The department, together with the college library, provides a wide range of enrichment activities. This includes visiting authors, theatre visits, public speaking, interviews, Carnegie shadowing, book competitions and certificates for the 'best book borrowers'. As a result, students in Key Stage 3 read widely.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

The effectiveness of leadership and management in English is good.

- The head of English has successfully created a shared vision of improving teaching and learning across the very large department of 24 teachers.
- Self-evaluation is brief but accurately identifies key priorities to inform the subject development plan.
- The department carries out a wide range of monitoring, including tracking students' progress, lesson observations and scrutiny of students' work. However, the information is not evaluated rigorously, or shared with teachers, to identify and improve the impact of teaching on the progress of all students.
- The head of English demonstrates good capacity for improvement. Procedures are being embedded to sustain improvement and the monitoring and evaluation skills of key stage coordinators within the department are being developed

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- using targets and assessment more effectively to match lessons to the range of abilities, particularly for more able students
- evaluating the information gleaned from monitoring, and sharing it with teachers, to identify and improve the impact of teaching on the learning and progress of all students, particularly in the sixth form.

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

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. Except in the case of academies, a copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Sue Frater
Her Majesty's Inspector