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Mrs C McLintock
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs McLintock

Ofsted 2012–13 subject survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 27 and 28 February 2013 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; a learning walk and observation of ten lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is good.

Achievement in English is good.

- Students enter with average attainment and make good progress in Key Stage 3. Past trends in Key Stage 4 have been good, with students achieving well at GCSE. However, the most recent results were disappointing with the percentage achieving A* to C grades in English Language and English Literature being below average. The school has taken urgent and effective action to address this and students are currently on track to achieve challenging targets in GCSEs which exceed national expectations.
- All groups achieve well, including students known to be eligible for free school meals, disabled students and those with special educational needs. A particular strength is the rapid progress that vulnerable students make in their reading due to the provision of very effective individualised learning programmes.

- Although last summer's English Literature A level results were below average, the current Year 13 students achieved well in their English Literature AS levels and are on track to meet or exceed their targets in their A levels this summer. No students are currently in Year 12, but a much larger number than in recent years has applied for the sixth form in 2013/14.
- Students' written work is well presented and they speak with enthusiasm about teaching and their learning in English, although some admit to being less enthusiastic about their wider reading for pleasure. Key Stage 4 students feel that the school's focus on writing is challenging but is helping them to rapidly improve the outcomes of their timed assessments.

Teaching in English is good.

- Lessons are well planned, structured and take good account of students' prior learning. There is a strong focus on raising standards in the quality of students' writing. Teachers have good subject knowledge. A consistent strength is the way in which links are made to assessment criteria so that students have a clear understanding of their targets and what they need to do to improve their work. In the best lessons, imaginative activities and energetic teaching successfully motivate students to achieve well. In a Year 11 lesson, for example, a 'thinking hats' activity was successfully encouraging students to think more deeply about the features of persuasive writing. Teaching makes good use of homework, and behaviour in lessons is good. Sixth form students particularly value the feedback and exemplars that they are given to support their learning and progress.
- Marking is detailed, personalised and provides clear and accurate guidance on how to improve. Students are given plenty of practice in controlled assessments and the marking of these is particularly effective.
- Teaching is not yet outstanding because in a few lessons students are too passive and not all are sufficiently motivated by the teaching or the quality of the resources used to support teaching.

The curriculum in English is good.

- The curriculum is broad, balanced and well designed so as to meet the needs of all students. It is kept under constant review and supports teaching well. For example, plans have been adjusted to ensure that past weaknesses in students' achievement are being addressed. Units link to a wide range of texts, including poetry. In the sixth form, students particularly appreciate the diverse range of texts that they are studying. Individualised learning programmes are very well designed to support students with special educational needs.
- There are examples of exceptionally good practice in linking English to other subjects, such as a joint English and history unit on World War One and the War Poets. However, the school recognises that more needs to be done to raise the profile of literacy in all subject departments.

- The curriculum is enriched through close links with drama and regular theatre visits. A noticeable strength is the way in which students' confidence is enhanced by the well-established and extensive programme of varied literacy, drama and film making activities that they undertake in local primary schools.

Leadership and management of English are good.

- There has been a concerted effort by all leaders, including governors and senior leaders, to respond with urgency and rigour to the disappointing outcomes of the most recent GCSE and A level results, and this is proving to be effective. The department's evaluation of its performance is incisive and accurate. The resulting improvement plans accurately identify what needs to improve and how this will be achieved. Targets are challenging, but achievable.
- Monitoring in the past has been of very good quality because it has been very systematic and detailed. However, in the current year, although the quality of lessons is regularly monitored and this underpins performance management, there has been less rigour in monitoring practice and in evaluating the impact of improvement planning on students' achievement.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- strengthening teaching by ensuring that student engagement is consistently as good as in the best lessons
- raising the profile of literacy across all areas of the curriculum
- strengthening leadership by ensuring that monitoring reflects the very effective practice of the past.

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

As 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. A copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Chris Nye
Her Majesty's Inspector