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Mr R Wakefield
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Wakefield

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 10 and 11 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 satisfactory.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is satisfactory.

- Standards in GCSE English have improved strongly in recent years from a very low base and are just below average in Year 11. In 2007, fewer than one in three students gained grade C or above. This figure increased considerably to nearly one in two students in 2009, although no students gained the very highest grades of A* or A.
- Results for 2009 GCSE English Literature broadly matched those for English. The school enters a higher proportion of its students for this examination than most schools. A small proportion gained the very highest grades.

- Current progress is satisfactory following a period of significantly below average progress over the past three years. Data for this period show little significant difference in the progress of different groups of students, although the 2009 outcomes for girls at grade C or above were much better than for boys. Progress during Key Stage 3 is securely satisfactory, particularly in reading which has improved rapidly in recent years.
- Progress in the lessons observed was good overall. Students consistently worked hard and were determined to try and put into practice the guidance their teachers gave them. Levels of interest and engagement were consistently good. One student commented; 'There's lots of involvement in English.'

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Good teaching was consistently evident in the vast majority of lessons visited. This consistency has been a key factor in the recent improvements in standards at Key Stages 3 and 4.
- Thorough lesson planning identifies clearly the learning objectives and a good range of methods to achieve them. Teachers make sure the students know exactly what they have to do through clear demonstration of good practice. Students have the confidence and motivation to succeed.
- The pace of whole-class question and answer sessions is rapid and gains keen responses. However, teachers do not always encourage students enough to respond to each other's ideas, so closing down opportunities to extend students' independent thinking.
- The great majority of students expressed positive opinions about English. A small number of higher attaining students at both key stages felt there could be more opportunities for creative work.
- The well-embedded use of an assessment focus, often in tandem with explicit use of assessment criteria, has a positive impact on learning. The subject has good assessment systems but their use is inconsistent. Some marking is extremely precise about strengths and weaknesses but other lacks this precision.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The curriculum in English is satisfactory.

- At Key Stage 4, the reduction in time allocated to English Language course work completion has led to the pupils receiving increasingly thorough preparation for their English examinations.
- Curriculum planning is thoughtful and strategic. Both long- and medium-term schemes of work use assessment focuses effectively to steer the work. The Year 7 scheme has good balance in its range of texts and media. Key Stage 3 students enjoy studying challenging texts. New units of work support the development of functional skills in Year 9.

- There are not enough opportunities for extended writing in Key Stage 3. The writing curriculum does not build effectively enough on the students' prior achievements.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are satisfactory.

- There are strengths in the subject's motivating leadership but shortcomings in its monitoring and evaluation. There is an admirable, shared determination among all English staff and senior leaders to continue the recent improvements in results. The subject leader and line manager each set a highly professional example through their good teaching, their very good use of assessment and their high aspirations.
- Senior leadership is supportive. The school has allocated an additional lesson to English in Year 11 and arranged external guidance. It has also supported the switch to a different examination board at GCSE.
- The use of data to support evaluation and to focus planning for improvement is not sufficiently thorough. The department's self-evaluation is too descriptive. It does not identify explicitly where outcomes need to be better or what the barriers to success are. The action plan for improvement lacks hard-edged success criteria to inform evaluation. Monitoring is satisfactory but does not ensure consistent implementation of all subject policies, such as assessment.

Provision for gifted and talented students in English

In Key Stage 3, schemes of work are beginning to include separate lesson tasks for gifted and talented students. The department has also written a literary heritage scheme for Year 7 gifted and talented students. A small number of students has joined the school's successful public speaking team but, overall, there is not a wide range of targeted enrichment activities for these students in English.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising standards in English further by:
 - increasing the opportunities for extended writing in Key Stage 3
 - making more effective use of performance data to support evaluation and planning
 - ensuring consistent application of the department's assessment procedures
 - improving questioning in lessons to enable students to respond directly to each other's contributions.

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

Chris Griffin
Additional Inspector