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Mr M Cooper
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Dear Mr Cooper

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 28 and 29 November 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.

The overall effectiveness of English is good.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- Attainment is broadly average at the end of Key Stage 4. There was a dip in the GCSE English Literature results last year although the school enters a very high proportion of students. Standards have risen at the end of Key Stage 3 but remained fairly static at Key Stage 4. The proportion of students achieving A or A* grades is below average.
- Students make good progress in English, relative to their starting points, and performance in English compares well with other subjects in the school. Most groups of students make similar progress, including boys, girls, and some students with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

- Most students are very positive about English, settle quickly to work, and enjoy lessons. Behaviour is generally good and students work well in mixed pairs or groups when guidance is clear and explicit.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Strengths of lessons observed include: good relationships; clear learning objectives; good-quality planning and structuring of lessons; the enthusiasm and commitment of teachers; and use of a good range of activities and resources.
- Approaches to differentiation within the mixed-ability classes were not always effective enough in providing challenge for more able students. There was also a tendency for some teachers to focus on activities rather than the learning outcomes in lessons.
- Most students speak well of their English teachers. They acknowledge their teachers' enthusiasm for the subject and appreciate the extra support they receive.
- Assessment practice is mixed. Some marking is very detailed and provides helpful pointers for future progress. Other marking is less effective, with an overemphasis on praise, especially for more able students. All students know their target levels but they are not always sure what they need to do to achieve them. The work sample suggested that there is too little emphasis on using marking to improve spelling and standards of handwriting and presentation are not always high enough. There was too little extended writing in some books.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum in English is good.

- The curriculum is broad, balanced and provides consistency across classes. There is good emphasis on poetry and literary texts. Students identified a lack of opportunity for them to use information and communication technology in English.
- The curriculum is well planned across both key stages and successfully engages most students. It is currently being revised at Key Stage 3 to focus more on the development of skills in the subject and this offers opportunities to plan more effectively for progression. The department provides a conventional half-termly programme of units. A more flexible model might allow for greater emphasis on areas that are currently underdeveloped including spelling, the promotion of independent reading, and the more explicit teaching of speaking and listening skills
- A detailed intervention programme helps students to make good progress. This is supplemented by a wide range of enrichment activities. The School Library/Learning Resource Centre contributes significantly to this through frequent author visits, World Book Day events, and visits by students to

bookshops to buy books for the library. Other English activities available include a film club, visits to the theatre, competitions and debates.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

The effectiveness of leadership and management in English is good.

- A new head of department was appointed at the beginning of the term. She has worked hard and achieved a lot in a limited period, focusing on schemes of work and improving quality assurance. The school's self-evaluation in English is accurate and robust. Senior leaders have provided good direction and support to the work of the new subject leader.
- There is a clear vision for English in the school, based on principles such as a commitment to mixed-ability teaching, entering nearly all students for GCSE English Literature, and active learning approaches. The intention now is to improve collaborative working and the sharing of good practice.
- A clear calendar of monitoring involves learning walks, focus weeks, work scrutiny, and lesson observations. The new subject leader has written a useful interim action plan that establishes a clear, medium-term set of priorities. In the longer term, there will need to be guidance on how to improve teaching and learning further. The capacity for further improvement is good.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 by:
 - improving feedback to students on ways of improving their work
 - ensuring a high level of challenge for more able students across all lessons
 - improving writing through a more consistent approach to spelling and presentation, and ensuring that all students complete enough extended writing
 - planning more explicitly for the development of speaking and listening skills.

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

Philip Jarrett
Her Majesty's Inspector