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24 March 2014

Mr A Dawson  
Headteacher  
St Mary's Catholic High School  
Manchester Road  
Astley  
Tyldesley  
Manchester  
M29 7EE

Dear Mr Dawson

### **Ofsted 2013–14 subject survey inspection programme: English**

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 18 and 19 March 2014 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: discussion with you, with the members of your leadership team, the Head of Faculty and with teachers and students. I observed eight lessons, drawn from each key stage, most of which were observed jointly with you or members of your senior team. I reviewed students' work and a range of documents such as the school and faculty self-evaluations and action plans and information about students' attainment and progress over the past three years.

### **The overall effectiveness of English is outstanding.**

#### **Achievement in English is outstanding.**

- Most students enter your school with slightly higher than average prior attainment. All groups make outstanding progress to achieve significantly higher than average grades at GCSE. This has been the pattern for at least three years, with a sustained upward trend. Girls consistently outperform boys at St Mary's but boys here make more rapid progress and achieve better results at GCSE than all girls nationally.
- Students benefiting from additional funding (the pupil premium for those known to be eligible for free school meals or to be in the care of the local

authority or with parents in the armed forces) do not progress as rapidly as their school contemporaries but the gap is closing steadily. These students make better progress than students as a whole nationally.

- English-related courses are popular in the sixth form and students achieve good results. In 2013, two-thirds achieved grades A or B at A level in English Literature or English Language and Literature. Those taking A level courses in Communication and Culture Studies and BTEC courses in Media Studies also achieved good results.
- Students in all year groups are well-motivated, responsive and conscientious. They have justifiable confidence in their teachers' subject knowledge and their skills in preparing students for national examinations. 'Teachers get you involved.' They speak with engaging enthusiasm about the work they do in English and clearly enjoy tackling challenging texts, both modern and traditional. A Key Stage 3 student explained: 'What we do in our lessons inspires us to read at home.'

### **Teaching in English is outstanding.**

- Students' progress is evidence that teachers have a clear understanding of GCSE, AS and A level requirements and are effective in guiding students towards success. Amongst teachers' key strengths are secure subject knowledge and enthusiasm, a confident use of varied resources, excellent classroom management, and careful and generally constructive use of assessment to promote learning.
- When these strengths are embedded in an imaginative and challenging approach to traditional texts or topics, the teaching is outstanding. A Year 10 group, for example, arrived to find the classroom set out as a crime scene, with clues about the identity of the victim and her probable relationship with her murderer. This discussion was then skilfully moved by the teacher into an analytical, forensic reading of the poem in which the fatal relationship is presented.
- Teaching is also characterised by close attention to students' individual needs, learning styles and ambitions. Effective use is made of group work and students are encouraged to reinforce their own learning by reviewing each other's work.
- Occasionally, opportunities are missed to develop an idea in depth through discussion or to explore an unplanned line of enquiry sparked by a student's contribution to a whole-class question and answer session.
- Sixth form lessons are well planned and carefully matched to students' current levels. There are opportunities for students to lead discussion but this is not always followed up by challenge and debate. Teachers clearly enjoy the range of topics and texts involved and communicate that pleasure well to their students. Assessed work in students' folders is most often substantial and well-attuned to AS or A level demands. The work is regularly marked and teachers' comments are precisely targeted and clear about AS and A level requirements, which students rightly value.

### **The curriculum in English is outstanding.**

- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is being successfully revised to tackle the achievement gap between boys and girls and to make progress across the three years of the key stage less uneven. There is a stronger focus on challenging and appealing texts, both traditional and modern, and on the use of media and technology. Key Stage 3 students are enjoying the experience. There is an increase in the additional support, including after-school sessions, for those struggling with any aspect of English.
- Students are taught in ability-based sets in Key Stage 4, which they feel serves them well. Texts and topics they are studying match their abilities and ways of working, so that they gain confidence and remain engaged.
- The range of courses offered in the sixth form suits students' different interests and ambitions. Many choose to stay on for both sixth form years and then progress to English-related courses at university or college.
- There is a well-balanced, long-term programme of English-related enrichment events, including theatre visits, university lectures and poetry workshops. Students enjoy and value these.

### **Leadership and management of English are outstanding.**

- Your high expectations are energetically and rigorously promoted by the senior leaders. With your leadership team, you are quick to respond to changes nationally and to in-school trends.
- The Head of Faculty combines considerable experience, well-informed enthusiasm and a commitment to maintaining the upward trend in attainment and rates of progress by all students. She is very successfully encouraging younger members of the department to take on key areas of development, such as Key Stage 3.

### **Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:**

- developing the habits and skills of debate in all key stages
- raising all teaching to the level of the best by more sharing of best practice and by closely monitoring the result.

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

**Patricia Metham**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**