

Alexandra House T 08456 404040
33 Kingsway F 020 7421 6855
London enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
WC2B 6SE www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mrs I O'Mara
Headteacher
St Edmunds Catholic School
Arundel Street
Portsmouth
Hampshire
PO11RX

Dear Mrs O'Mara

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 06 - 07 November to look at work in English.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject the visit had a particular focus on our current survey theme: provision for independent learning. 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 made included: interviews with staff and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of six lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good with some outstanding features.

Achievement and standards

Standards are above average and pupils' achievement is good.

- Attainment on entry to the school is broadly average.
- All groups, including pupils with special educational needs, those with English as an additional language and able pupils, achieve equally well.
- Pupils make good progress overall. At Key Stage 3, standards are just above average at Level 5+. At Level 6+, standards are above average and show a gradually improving trend. At Key Stage 4, standards in Language are improving rapidly, from below average in 2005, to above average in 2007. Standards in Literature are average.

- Pupils speak with clarity and are generally confident. Most listen well. They are reflective and critical readers and independent, confident writers, able to write well for a variety of purposes and audiences.
- English makes a good contribution to pupils' personal development, particularly through the very positive relationships between staff and pupils, the impact of enrichment activities and opportunities for independent and collaborative learning.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Some teaching observed was outstanding.
- Expectations for achievement are consistently high, good planning meets the differing needs of pupils well and they are prepared well for tests and examinations.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge. Lessons are interesting, challenging, well sequenced and build on previous knowledge successfully. Good and well used resources, a good range of teaching and learning strategies, good explanations and effective questioning develop and extend learning. Pupils enjoy their lessons, work hard and achieve well.
- Assessment for learning has a considerable impact on pupils' progress. Pupils are clear of their targets and about what they are going to learn. Marking is thorough, highly supportive and sets clear goals for improvement. Self and peer assessment are used well.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The English curriculum is rich and varied with some outstanding features. It is well planned for balance, breadth and progression and subject to regular review. Skills are systematically taught and poetry, drama and media are integrated well.
- Texts are very well chosen to engage and challenge pupils of all abilities. These make a particularly significant contribution to their social and cultural development and present frequent opportunities to examine current and controversial issues.
- Interventions in reading and spelling are systematically evaluated and result in good gains in learning. Other activities, for example with boys with low levels of literacy, strengthen collaborative skills and the use of technology for writing.
- Enrichment activities in all aspects of English broaden provision considerably and challenge pupils to achieve highly.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are outstanding.

- The English department is wholly deserving of its high profile in the school. Highly effective leadership contributes unequivocally to high standards. The department is strongly self-critical and highly evaluative, resulting in an accurate view of strengths and weaknesses, a very clear sense of direction and good plans for improvement.
- The department's success is based on: clear policies and procedures; more stable staffing; a committed and hard-working team; systematic monitoring and review; exceptionally well analysed performance data; meticulous assessment and tracking of pupils' progress; and prompt and well targeted action to remedy under-achievement.

Provision for independent learning

Provision for independent learning is good.

- Pupils enjoy English and make generally good progress. They gain in confidence and apply what they have been taught in independent contexts well, most notably in creative writing in class and for publication.
- Pupils are given regular opportunities for research in tasks set for homework. They frequently present their findings orally and have good opportunities to make formal presentations on their writing and topics of their own choice. Pupils' personal opinions are explicitly sought, although responses are sometimes curtailed through lack of confidence.
- Independent reading is strongly encouraged and the school library is an important and effective aspect of provision.
- Enrichment activities contribute well to independent learning.

Inclusion

Inclusion is good.

- The department responds to the differing needs of pupils well and no group of pupils underachieves.
- Curricular provision, enrichment activities and interventions have a positive impact on motivation, behaviour, progress and attainment.
- The rigorous assessment and systematic tracking of the progress of individual pupils and targets for teaching groups are particularly significant in ensuring expectations are high for all pupils.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- continuing to raise standards further as identified by the school, and
- developing pupils' confidence to justify personal opinions in lessons.

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

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and Local Learning Skills Council. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term and made available to the team for the next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Rosemary Matthews
Her Majesty's Inspector