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Mr R Rossides
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Dear Mr Rossides

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: independent learning 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 made included: interviews with staff and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of nine lessons or part lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English are average and achievement is satisfactory.

- Standards of work seen in class and in pupils' books support the school's forecasts of Year 9 and 11 attaining broadly average standards in 2008 in English.
- Standards at Key Stage 3 in 2006 were broadly average and pupils made satisfactory progress. Boys' performance was close to the national average for boys. There was an element of underperformance by girls. Test papers for 2007 are currently being remarked.
- Standards at GCSE dropped in 2007 from the broadly average in 2006 to below average. There are no structural reasons why this should

have happened other than the dynamic of the year group. Standards in English literature were above average in 2006 with half the year group taking the subject. Fewer pupils took the subject in 2007 but standards remained above average.

- Pupils lack academic confidence and have low self-esteem. Pupils' aspirations are often low. Gains are therefore hard won, demonstrated in the steady but incremental improvement in the proportion of pupils gaining five A* to C grades including mathematics and English up to 2007. They behave well in English and have good attitudes to the subject. Pupils make good progress in lessons and satisfactory progress over time because there is good teaching and a considerable amount of formal and informal intervention and support.
- There is a significant gain in maturity and independence in the sixth form. At A2 all students passed in 2007, almost all at their grade predictions. At AS almost all students passed with four students attaining one grade below target.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning in English is good.

- Teaching is good and fosters good learning in lessons and satisfactory progress over time. The department has a strong core of experienced English teachers who are confident in their subject and the requirements of the tests and examination.
- Relationships with pupils are good and teaching creates a positive work ethos in classrooms. Clear objectives that build on previous work, effective use of plenaries, and the development of a partnership approach with pupils, are all strong features.
- Teachers foster pupils' growing independent thinking well through good and sometimes excellent marking. Pupils are clear about what they need to do in order to improve. Teachers effectively share test and examination criteria and make very good use of diagnostic marking grids. Teachers set very clear written targets.
- Teachers are clearly committed to the students and provide them with considerable formal and informal support. The department is currently trying out a particular approach to discussion work. Building on this, teachers should now extend further the range of strategies they use to engage pupils practically, developing their skills with the interactive white boards and using drama techniques within the classroom.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is satisfactory.

- The curriculum has some significant strengths. Sixth form students reflecting upon their English experience in the main school enjoyed the trips they undertook, the poetry, films and plays they studied. They felt

that they were always doing something different. They also enjoyed the opportunities to express their own ideas.

- The department has reviewed the schemes of work for Key Stage 3 and there is a good sense of curriculum entitlement across all groups. There is consistent reinforcement of critical reading and writing for purpose and specific audiences. There are good planned opportunities for speaking and listening.
- English literature is studied at GCSE by about a third of the year group. The majority of pupils study the English language course only, which contains a core of text and media work. Individual teachers supplement these opportunities with explorations of texts for 'fun' rather than assessment. These opportunities should be made explicit in the upper school schemes of work.
- ICT is not a strong enough feature of English work.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management of English are at least satisfactory.

- This is a department in the process of transition. After a period of stability, there have been changes in staffing and the new head of department took up the role in September. It is too soon to judge her leadership. Strong teamwork is evident. Teachers are reflective and supportive of each other, evidenced in the collaborative shared planning across the department. They demonstrate a strong commitment to the pupils and students. A Year 11 pupil said that the 'English department pushes you – but in a nice way.'
- The current head of department brings a calm, organised approach and is taking a step-by-step approach to tackling issues such as ensuring coursework matches projected grades. She has a clear view of the strengths of the department and has introduced some additional monitoring procedures. There is a clear departmental improvement plan.
- The analysis of pupils' performance requires more rigour in the use of data across the department.
- The recently introduced traffic light system for tracking pupils' progress requires further development to ensure that it is based on accurate assessment and is set against challenging year-on-year targets. Current targets are not always demanding enough, particularly for able pupils.

Independent learning in English

Independent learning in English is satisfactory.

- The provision for developing independence is good yet many students remain reliant on staff for ongoing encouragement and support.

- The major strength in the provision is the clear development of a partnership approach with pupils. A Year 11 pupil expressed the view that 'you worked with the English department...there was a different relationship to other departments.' Through the redrafting process, diagnostic marking, development of self-assessment skills, shared criteria and the good quality of curricular targets, the department effectively fosters pupils' independent thinking.
- Year 13 students were clear about how the department structured their independence by gradually taking the support structure away. The effectiveness can be seen in the fact that students' written responses are individual, achieved through the drafting process and are not just repeating a structured 'modelled' approach. The course provides good opportunities for research within a range of units across the school.
- Independent reading is consistently encouraged. Homework is also a strong feature of the work of the department. Speaking and listening are given an appropriate priority and units of work provide good opportunities for pupils to express their ideas. Older pupils make use of the authority-wide e-learning zone to provide revision support and access to teachers and to forward work to and from school.

Inclusion

Inclusion in English is satisfactory.

- Pupils make satisfactory rather than good progress overall because there is still some underachievement both of girls at Key Stage 3 and girls and boys at Key Stage 4.
- Pupils starting the school at Level 5 are not always making the progress that they should. There are good strategies for supporting pupils at level 3 when they join the school so that the proportion gaining level 5 is above average. Pupils with statements taught within the resource base make good progress.
- There is an extensive programme of formal and informal support for pupils, which include Easter school, course work clinics booster and literacy progress units.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that analysis of pupils' performance in English makes more rigorous use of data and national comparisons,
- enhancing the current tracking system to ensure that targets are challenging and pupils' progress is evaluated accurately, and
- improving the use of ICT within English.

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/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

Roderick Passant
Additional Inspector