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Ms C Mullane
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Dear Ms Mullane

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 30-31 March 2009 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 creativity 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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of seven lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be satisfactory and improving.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is satisfactory. Standards are average and improving.

- Students have slightly below average standards in English when they join the school.
- By the end of Year 9, standards in English are now broadly average. Results in national tests over the past three years, though below average, show steady improvement. Based on provisional results, the proportion of students who attained Level 5 or above increased further in 2008 and was very close to the national average.
- Standards at the end of Year 11 are also closing the gap. Virtually all students pass GCSE or a functional qualification in English, and more than average take a GCSE in English Literature. The school has acted successfully to bring the number of students who attain Grade C in

English in line with the national picture. In the current Year 11, 61% of students have already attained this grade, following their early entry for examination.

- The school is now taking effective steps to increase the number who reach higher grades in both English and English Literature. Its progress data show most students are currently on track to meet challenging individual targets.
- Attitudes to English are generally positive. The risk of disaffection on the part of some boys and girls is tackled effectively. As a result, achievement in both key stages meets expectations for all groups of students, and is rising.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory and improving.

- Better results in both key stages indicate the improving effectiveness of teaching and learning. They reflect improvements in staffing and the consistency of teaching across the department.
- Students speak well of the care and guidance they receive from their English teachers. They enjoy their opportunities to play a full and active part in lessons. Relationships between teachers and students are good; high expectations of behaviour are set and students respond positively.
- Lesson observations confirmed that teachers plan interesting and challenging lessons, using their good understanding of students' capabilities. Students are engaged by varied and often practical activities. There are plenty of opportunities for drama, pair and group work linked to reading and writing. Teachers use information and communication technology (ICT) purposefully, for example, to illustrate key concepts or skills through short audio-visual clips. Lesson objectives are always shared and students understand how the activities link to them.
- The lessons observed were more effective when students had a clear understanding of how to do well. When students understood – or even helped to devise - success criteria, they stretched themselves to meet higher challenges in their independent work and reflected thoughtfully on their progress through self- or peer-review. There was sometimes less clarity about what counts as good work, especially in speaking and listening activities, so that effort wavered and progress was more limited. Sometimes too much discussion was directed by the teacher, giving too little time for students to demonstrate what they had learnt.
- Assessment in English is good. In addition to sharing and reviewing learning objectives in lessons, teachers mark written work regularly and informatively. They set clear short term targets and check that they are met, and this has led to improvements in the quality of students' work. Students' progress is regularly reviewed and, if there are dips, interventions follow swiftly.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is satisfactory.

- The English curriculum is being revised in both key stages. As it stands, the curriculum is engaging students' interest effectively, although not yet ensuring that all students make good progress.
- Students are offered a good range of courses in Key Stage 4. The great majority are entered for GCSE in English and in English Literature, with drama as a further option. A new GCSE English Studies syllabus has been selected partly because it appeals to students by making use of a range of media texts.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is clearly organised as a series of units with distinctive purposes. It provides opportunities for the use of ICT in English, and the study of media texts. Increasingly, it emphasises the development of students' speaking and listening skills and independent learning.
- The department is working to ensure that its new Key Stage 3 programme includes sufficient breadth and progression. Involvement in the Assessing Student Progress initiative is informing the approaches used, and the new programme includes regular assessments.
- Key Stage 3 students speak with enthusiasm about their current work. They are, for example, enjoying the challenge of reading classic novels and exploring Shakespeare through classroom drama. Scrutiny of their writing suggests they are responding more confidently to opportunities to write independently and at length.
- Enrichment activities include theatre visits, a school newspaper produced in partnership with the local press and extra help for students with examination preparation.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are good.

- The department's performance is improving as a result of a determined and effective drive. After a searching review, significant changes have been made to the curriculum and approaches to teaching and learning.
- The department is well led. The new subject leader is working closely with his predecessor, now head of faculty, to implement a strategic plan for improvement. The direction for the subject is well understood by the departmental team, who feel encouraged and supported to take productive risks.
- The team is now strong, and working well together to spread successful approaches and develop new schemes of work. There is generally good consistency in the way approaches are being used across the team. Teachers evaluate their teaching professionally; they are firmly focussed on improving students' progress.

- School self evaluation is good. The school tracks students' progress closely to identify any areas of concern and to arrange interventions. It uses performance data well to review achievement and has a clear understanding of strengths and weaknesses in the subject. A good range of information, including students' views, has informed plans for improvement.
- The senior leadership team monitors the development of English closely and provides good support. It has enabled the department to acquire new skills and take up initiatives. Its investment in peer observation and team teaching has helped improve consistency and effectiveness across the department. However, the lesson observation notes for teachers, and the success criteria in the subject development plan, do not focus clearly enough on the impact of initiatives on learning and students' progress.

Creativity in English

The department is seeking to enhance students' creativity through changes to its schemes of work at Key Stage 3, especially through opportunities for students to learn actively and work collaboratively. Lessons give students many opportunities to work things out for themselves and to take decisions in small groups. One observed lesson was planned with the students, and this had a very positive effect on their attitudes. Some writing tasks are designed to give students the opportunity to develop their own ideas, and teachers respond positively when students show individual thinking. The department has been creative in using its resources to pair teachers to plan, teach and evaluate together.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising achievement in English above the satisfactory level by increasing the number of good and outstanding lessons
- involving students more effectively in their learning, by helping them understand what counts as success, especially in speaking and listening activities
- focussing monitoring and evaluation on the impact of initiatives on students' learning and progress.

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.

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

Susan Bowles
Her Majesty's Inspector