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Mr D Johnson  
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Dear Mr Johnson

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 16-17 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 twelve lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English are average overall. Students' achievement is good.

- Standards on entry to the school are below average in English, especially in relation to performance at the higher Level 5. Students make good progress during Key Stages 3 and 4 to secure average standards by the end of Year 11.
- After a period of well below average performance, GCSE English results have improved considerably since 2006. Students in the current Year 11 are maintaining this improvement. Approximately half have already achieved a GCSE grade C or higher in English. Work seen and school data show other students on course to reach this standard. Improved outcomes are also evident in Key Stage 3 standards but have still to be seen in GCSE English literature results.

- This much better picture reflects the effective and coherent determination of senior leaders, the subject leader and subject teachers to raise standards of both boys and girls through better teaching and learning.
- Achievement is currently good across both key stages. Nevertheless the subject leadership recognizes that results at the very highest levels at both Key Stage 3 and GCSE can improve further.
- Progress was consistently good in the lessons observed, reflecting significant improvements in the effectiveness of teaching. Students behaved well and were keen to learn. They approached their work in a capable and confident manner.

## Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning of English is good.

- Lessons are busy, students work hard and there is a constant focus on improving standards that leads to good progress.
- English is very popular. This is shown in students' considerable enjoyment in lessons and the good take-up of post-16 English courses when they leave. Students speak very highly of their English teachers. They praise the high quality feedback on their work, the good relationships with their teachers and the motivating activities in lessons.
- Lesson observations confirmed the very strong relationships between teachers, the support staff and the students. Students respond well to teachers' high expectations of behaviour. Learning activities closely match learning objectives so lessons proceed with good pace and a defined sense of purpose. The excellent, well-embedded use of the interactive white board adds motivation and clarity to learning. Students are engaged by a good range of active approaches, including frequent opportunities to work independently and with partners.
- Assessment is outstanding. Every lesson made clear the precise level of skill students needed to reach their targets. The students' clear understanding of how to improve is a major factor in their progress and is enhanced by frequent self and pair reviews where they make explicit use of assessment criteria.
- High levels of active engagement in group activities are not always matched by similar engagement in whole class discussion. Teachers are not consistently using methods that gain responses from a wide range of students by giving them chances to think about what they want to say or by giving students enough opportunity to respond to each other's contributions.
- The high expectations regarding behaviour are not applied consistently to the care and presentation of work in books.

## Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is good.

- At Key Stage 3 well planned units on topics such as conspiracy theories, soap operas and survival successfully motivate the students' interests. Imaginative activities ensure that students develop a good understanding of challenging texts such as "Hamlet". The strong emphasis across all units on the application of approaches from the Assessing Students' Progress initiative enhances progress. The policy of packaging units of work into short chunks of time ensures the curriculum retains a sense of freshness at both key stages.
- At Key Stage 4 the curriculum is well-balanced. Early completion of course work in Year 10 gives ample opportunity for good examination preparation through a succession of engaging units of work. The policy of GCSE English entry in November of Year 11 has enabled the department to arrange a personalised range of pathways from January until the June examinations. One outcome is a reduction in the number entering GCSE literature, but the entry rate is still broadly in line with the national average.
- The department is continuing to revise its Key Stage 3 curriculum in line with new expectations. This provides a good opportunity to deal with two areas for improvement: to increase the opportunities for extended writing throughout Years 7-9; and to do more to promote the students' personal reading.
- There is a wide range of enrichment activities: theatre visits, poetry competitions, developing links with other departments, and extra help for students with examination preparation.

## Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are good.

- Some features of leadership are outstanding. The subject leader is an excellent classroom practitioner. Her leadership in driving up standards has been outstanding, confirmed by the consistency of good practice across this very large department.
- She has established a strong sense of team work and secured the commitment of her whole team to raising achievement. Good teamwork is reflected in teachers collaborating to write units of work. The capacity for further improvement is good.
- Senior leadership has backed its intentions to support improvement in English through a carefully planned budget that has increased teaching and non teaching personnel and reduced class sizes.
- Self-evaluation is good. The department uses performance data well to review achievement and has a clear understanding of where to improve. Students' progress is tracked systematically to identify areas of concern.

- There is a coherent and systematic approach to monitoring and evaluation. Lesson observation forms are detailed but focus too much on teaching alone, rather than its impact on learning and students' progress.
- Action planning focuses accurately on where improvements are required. It includes clear success criteria at Key Stage 4 but not at Key Stage 3.

## Creativity in English

The school has selected thirty Year 8 students to train to become literacy leaders to develop positive leadership skills. The scheme begins with a motivational session presented by a media practitioner that stresses the importance of English and communication for careers in the media. The students will devise literacy learning materials which they will teach to their own classes and to Year 6 students in local primary schools. The focus will be on raising standards in spelling, punctuation and grammar through interactive tasks and games and also through using information and communication technology. Fun and enjoyment, as well as learning, are intended to be at the heart of the activities which the students devise.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising achievement in GCSE English literature and at the higher grades in English across Key Stages 3 and 4
- ensuring the Key Stage 3 curriculum increases opportunities for extended writing and for promoting students' personal reading.

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 and 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

Chris Griffin  
Additional inspector