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Dear Mrs James

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 8–9 July 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 spelling and handwriting. 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 good.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English are well above average. Achievement is good.

- Students join the school with above average attainment in English and they make good progress in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. Those who study English in the sixth form also make good progress.
- Standards in GCSE English are very high. Much higher proportions of students obtain good grades (A*-C) and the highest grades (A* and A) than the national average. In English literature, a higher than average proportion of students obtain good grades. However, the proportion awarded A* or A in 2008 was average, suggesting that the most able could have done better.

- Standards in Year 9 are high. The school's tracking of students' attainment shows that there was an improvement in standards in 2008. The current Year 9 students have reached slightly higher overall standards and exceeded the targets agreed for the school.
- The standards reached indicate that the measures taken in recent years to improve teaching and learning are beginning to have impact.
- English makes an outstanding contribution to students' excellent personal development. Students are consulted about their learning, in particular their enjoyment of English and the effectiveness of various components of courses. Their views are taken seriously by the department and influence the future development of policy. There is a strong and overt emphasis on developing skills for learning, such as independent enquiry and reflective thinking, and on the social and emotional aspects of learning.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning of English is good.

- Teaching is usually good and is sometimes of an outstanding quality. This was evident from the lessons seen, the school's monitoring and its tracking of students' progress, and examination of students' work.
- Typically, teachers have good knowledge of the subject and enthusiasm for it. They have positive relationships with the students and maintain an orderly, work-focused atmosphere in lessons. Information and communication technology is integral to teaching and learning. Several lessons were seen where teachers and students used interactive white boards and/or computers to good effect.
- The school has introduced a format for planning lessons which supports teachers in identifying clear learning objectives, linking lessons to previous learning and ensuring sufficient time is given to reinforcing key points and consolidating new learning.
- In the most effective lessons observed, expectations were high, the tasks set were imaginative and teachers gave students the confidence to tackle challenging work by modelling what they needed to do. New learning was consolidated at frequent intervals and question and answer sessions were used skilfully to challenge students' thinking and deepen their understanding.
- Students are often required to complete tasks in pairs or small groups. In several of the lessons seen, this led to productive learning but, at times, not all students participated fully.
- In less effective lessons, the pace of learning was more leisurely. Opportunities to push learning on through questioning were not used effectively and teachers did not ensure that all students were sufficiently engaged in all phases of the lesson. Consequently, for many students in these lessons, progress was simply satisfactory.
- The quality and usefulness of marking varies but, overall, it is good. Teachers' regular assessments of students' performance against clear

criteria is a positive element. The involvement of students in assessing their own achievements and areas for development is generally very effective. Nonetheless, some comments on students' work, particularly for the most able, give limited guidance on how to improve.

- Homework is used very effectively, with some imaginative long-term tasks which students take up with enthusiasm and commitment.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in English is good.

- The detailed curricular plans for each year group secure coverage of all that is required in the subject. The provision of courses meets the needs of less academic students, and there is very good integration of the development of students' learning skills. The plans also provide a very good structure for teachers to follow.
- Good attention is given to drama and media within the English curriculum.
- Well-considered adjustments have been made to the curriculum in Key Stage 3, taking account of recent national developments.
- Changes are made to the curriculum, for example to the set books used, in response to students' views.
- The school offers a sound range of enrichment activities, such as theatre visits.
- There are some initiatives to encourage students' wider independent reading, for instance, recommended books related to the topics studied in the cross-curricular 'Connect 3' course and the sixth form reading list. However, these initiatives have not yet led to widespread enthusiasm for reading among students.
- The positive impact of the English element of the school's specialism is seen, for instance, in some very well-planned cross-curricular work, strong curricular links with primary schools, and the involvement of English staff in the school's 'leading learning' team.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management of the provision in English are good.

- The school's evaluation of the effectiveness of provision in English is good. Standards and students' achievement are tracked carefully and analysed thoroughly at frequent intervals and the students' 'voice' is strong in this process. Sound plans are laid to tackle less successful areas.
- There is an enthusiasm for improvement and staff are involved in planning for further development in the subject. Targets are set high.
- The head of department has a clear sense of direction for the development of English. You and the deputy headteacher take an active interest in the department and work closely with the head of

department. You all have a clear view of the students' achievement and a determined focus on continuing to improve the quality of learning.

- A number of initiatives and changes in recent years are beginning to have a positive impact on standards and the quality of provision.

Spelling and handwriting

- Standards of spelling are at least average, although, for some students, knowledge of spelling rules is not secure. Many students have not developed a fluent joined script by the time they leave the school.
- There are no whole-school policies and guidance for the teaching of spelling and handwriting for students.
- A handwriting club has been run in Year 7 for weaker students. However, staff do not routinely check that students' handwriting is sufficiently fluent and accurate at speed to meet the demands of the curriculum in all subjects.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that the most able students achieve as well as they can
- further raising the quality of teaching, especially, where necessary, improving the pace, challenge, and match of work to students' differing needs.

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

Pat Kime
Her Majesty's Inspector