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Mr P Morrissey
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Dear Mr Morrissey

Ofsted survey inspection programme – English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 13 and 14 October 2009 to look at work 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 eight lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- Standards are consistently above average at the end of Key Stages 3 and 4. Attainment in the GCSE English Literature course tends to be better than in English Language. However, the provisional 2009 results for GCSE English Language were significantly higher than in previous years, reflecting recent changes to the English curriculum at Key Stage 4. Standards are generally higher in reading than in writing.
- Historically, achievement in English has not been as strong as attainment. Pupils make more progress in Key Stage 4 than in Key Stage 3 and the school acknowledges that some pupils have achieved too little in the past. The improvement in 2009 results shows that this problem is being tackled effectively. Progress in lessons observed was good overall.

- Girls attain more highly than boys at the higher levels in English at Key Stage 4. However, boys achieve at least as well as girls across Key Stage 3 and 4. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities make progress in line with other groups of pupils in the school.
- Standards are also above average in the sixth form and pupils make good progress.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Pupils speak very positively about English lessons. They appreciate teachers' enthusiasm for the subject, the lively activities, and high levels of care and concern shown for individual pupils.
- Teaching observed varied in quality but was good overall and never less than satisfactory. Some was outstanding. Relationships were strong and pupils were engaged by a good range of active and creative approaches. Teachers managed classes well. Subject knowledge is good and this led to a high level of challenge for pupils in some lessons, especially at Key Stage 4 and the sixth form. Lessons were planned well, with good opportunities for group and pair discussion.
- Where lessons were satisfactory, the pace was sometimes slow at the beginning of the lesson. In these lessons, the learning objectives were not clear enough and pupils completed often interesting activities without significant gains in subject knowledge or understanding.
- Teachers help pupils to understand assessment criteria and increasingly make good use of self- or peer-assessment. Pupils show good maturity in talking about how they can improve their work. The best marking helps them by identifying the next steps in their learning but some fails to give helpful feedback. Learning targets set by teachers are not followed up systematically enough.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The curriculum in English is good.

- Pupils enjoy English and this leads many of them, including comparatively large numbers of boys, to opt for English courses in the sixth form. The curriculum meets pupils' needs well. The vast majority are entered for English Literature at GCSE and a Media Studies course has been introduced. There are two A level courses available.
- The department has made changes to the Key Stage 4 course and these led to better results in 2009. The Key Stage 3 curriculum is broad and balanced, with good emphasis on the study of challenging literary texts. Reading is promoted well through regular reading lessons, good links with the library and awards for individual pupils. As a result, pupils enjoy reading and this carries through into good English Literature results.

- There are some interesting media units in the Key Stage 3 curriculum including opportunities for pupils to produce their own moving image texts. Writing skills are not developed as effectively as reading. The work sample indicated that some pupils, especially in shared classes, do too little extended writing, and opportunities to use information and communication technology (ICT) in school are limited. The curriculum focuses more on the study of literary than non literary texts.
- Extra-curricular activities contribute significantly to pupils' development in English through a good range of theatre visits, writers working in school, and clubs including a poetry club and a film club. The department has a good and well planned programme of support for pupils who need extra help across Key Stages 3 and 4.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are good.

- The Head of Department provides a clear vision for English based on the study of literary texts and the desire to help pupils 'think, explore and solve problems.' There is an acceptance that achievement should be better in English and recent changes at Key Stage 4 show a good capacity to bring about the necessary improvements. The two subject leaders work well together and offer different but complementary strengths.
- The recent departmental review has helped in identifying priorities for development, including aspects of teaching that need to be addressed. The department also makes good use of lesson observations, work sampling and moderation meetings to monitor the impact of teaching. The progress of pupils is well monitored and this information is used effectively to plan for additional support and intervention.
- The recent subject self evaluation is broadly accurate and identifies the need to refresh the Key Stage 3 curriculum although there is too much emphasis on standards rather than the progress made by pupils in English. The subject action plan is comprehensive and lists actions to be taken across all key stages rather than giving priority to the key actions that will make most difference to higher standards in the next year.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- developing the Key Stage 3 curriculum by:
 - reviewing the balance of literary and non literary study
 - increasing pupils' use of ICT in English
 - improving the quality of planning for shared classes.
- improving pupils' achievement in writing by:
 - ensuring that all pupils have sufficient opportunities for extended writing
 - giving clear feedback to pupils through teachers' marking.

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/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

Philip Jarrett HMI
National Adviser for English