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Dear Mr Edwards

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 17 and 18 November 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 five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of English is satisfactory.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is satisfactory.

- Standards are well below average at the end of both key stages. However, results in GCSE English Language improved substantially in 2008, and the unvalidated results for 2009 suggest that this rising trend has been maintained. Results in GCSE English Literature also improved in 2009 although fewer students were entered for the examination.
- Too few students achieve the higher grades in English at the end of Key Stage 4.

- Progress overall is satisfactory. Students tend to do better across Key Stage 4 than in Key Stage 3. The 2008 results showed that many students in that year had made good progress by the age of 16; this included many students with lower prior attainment.
- Girls achieve more highly than boys. The attainment gap between boys and girls by the end of Key Stage 4 is broadly in line with average.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is satisfactory.

- The quality of teaching varies across the department. In lessons observed where teaching was no better than satisfactory, this was often because teachers focused too much on the activities chosen for students and too little on planned gains in learning.
- Strengths of teaching observed included: good relationships with students; the use of lively activities that engaged students; and a range of good group and oral tasks. The department is supported well by classroom assistants although teachers do not always use them effectively enough in meeting the needs of all students, for instance through provision of focused group work. At its best, teaching had good pace, clear objectives and innovative materials were used well to motivate students.
- There was a lack of challenge in some lessons with teachers' expectations too low; this particularly limited the achievement of more able students.
- The department is beginning to make use of level-related target sheets to share assessment criteria with students; however, students are not yet able to use this to identify how to improve their work. Marking varies substantially in quality. Much work is marked in detail and the most effective gives students clear feedback on areas of weakness. Less effective marking is either sketchy or relies too much on indiscriminate praise.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The curriculum in English is satisfactory.

- The department currently enters fewer students for GCSE English Literature than the national average because it is concentrating its efforts on improving results in GCSE English Language. However, it also enters some of the lower attaining students for GCSE media studies as it believes that this course motivates them more highly.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is currently being revised. There are some innovative features to the programme. Students make more regular use of information and communication technology (ICT) in English than in many schools and although this has a positive impact on standards in both literacy and ICT, students need more opportunities to compose and re-draft at the computer.

- The Key Stage 3 curriculum integrates drama and wider reading well. Teachers are also making use of some good-quality contemporary fiction to engage students, particularly boys. The scheme gives good coverage of literary texts but there is less focus on non-literary texts and on students producing a range of media texts. Extra support is provided for students through a targeted literacy unit in Year 7.
- Some students have recently been able to work with writers and poets in school, and there is an annual film trip focused on one of the texts studied in Key Stage 3. The department acknowledges that the range of enrichment activities is not yet extensive. However, staff support students well through additional out-of-school revision and intervention classes.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are satisfactory.

- The school acknowledges that standards in English need to be higher. There is a clear focus on strategies for improving students' achievement and the subject action plan identifies the right priorities for further development.
- Leadership in English has been strengthened through the appointment of a new second in department. It also receives good support from the senior leadership team.
- There is now very close and regular monitoring of students' progress at Key Stage 4 with intensive support and intervention provided where needed. As a result, standards have risen in the past couple of years. The department is making use of a wide range of initiatives to motivate students including the GCSE media course, early entry for GCSE English Language, the Literacy Plus programme, the appointment of a permanent teaching assistant in English and interventions including individual support.
- However, practice across the department is not yet consistent enough in teaching or marking. Although the department meets regularly, the minutes of meetings suggest that more time needs to be spent discussing key areas of teaching and the curriculum, including opportunities to share good practice. This will be especially helpful to newer members of the department.
- Inconsistencies in practice suggest that monitoring and evaluation need to be improved. There is no current departmental self-evaluation report. Although the subject action plan is effective in many respects, it is not clear how the department aims to improve teaching further or use the new Key Stage 3 curriculum as a means of driving up standards.

Spelling and handwriting

There is little focused teaching of spelling at present. The department has a policy but classroom practice remains inconsistent in this area. Some teachers correct students' spelling mistakes in detail but it is not always clear that this has a positive impact on students' writing. A targeted intervention programme

was provided last year for students with particular weaknesses in handwriting but this is not available at present.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising standards in English across both key stages and increasing the number of students achieving the higher grades at GCSE by:
 - planning lessons around clear learning objectives that have a direct impact on students' progress in English
 - setting higher expectations for all students, including the higher attaining students in all classes
 - improving feedback to students about how they can develop their work
 - improving monitoring and evaluation to clarify how the department aims to improve teaching and the impact of the curriculum.

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 and will also be made available to the team for the next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Philip Jarrett
Her Majesty's Inspector