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Mrs M Allan
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Dear Mrs Allan

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 9 and 10 February 2010 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 provision for gifted and talented pupils 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 included: interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of 11 lessons, which included two sessions of an off-timetable media project.

The overall effectiveness of English is good.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good

- Attainment has been consistently high. In 2009 the proportion gaining A* to C in English Language and English Literature was well above national averages. Girls outperformed boys.
- Progress across both Key Stages is good, exceeding expectations based on assessments at the end of Year 6. This reflects the impact of well targeted interventions based on impressively rigorous analysis of students' levels and progress.

- The department has set up 'challenge groups' for able but underachieving students in Years 10 and 11, principally boys. While the leadership team acknowledges that opportunities to stretch the most able are not yet consistently exploited, tracking of students' progress indicates that the gender gap is closing.
- Students are generally willing learners who enjoy the subject. Year 11 students, for example, judged English to be 'a well-rounded subject' in which 'you get to think for yourself'. They do not, however, listen carefully enough to each other so do not make the most of others' ideas.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- Students' enthusiasm and strong attainment indicate that teaching overall is effective. Much was seen that was good or better, characterised by secure and enthusiastic subject knowledge, planning that built successfully on students' prior knowledge and skills, lively pace, variety of approach, well-deployed assessment strategies and a confident use of technology.
- In a few lessons, however, lack of appropriate challenge and pace and too few opportunities for students to play an active part in their learning led to a loss of focus and, on occasion, to low level disruption.
- The marking of most written work presented a constructive balance of encouragement and specific guidance on how to improve, leading to regular updating of students' personal targets.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The curriculum in English is good.

- Curriculum provision is inclusive and well structured. Schemes of work and medium-term planning ensure that National Curriculum and GCSE requirements are reliably covered. Lesson plans reflect teachers' particular strengths and choice of resources, with topics and approaches well matched to students' abilities and interests.
- The department has responded imaginatively to the ending of national tests at the end of Key Stage 3. While early entry for GCSE at the beginning of Year 11 is encouraged, the focus in Year 9 is very successfully on breadth and variety of experience. This approach is increasing motivation and encouraging more independent learning.
- Students in Key Stage 3 benefit from a lively enrichment programme, with writers' and actors' workshops proving especially engaging. This is not currently extended into Key Stage 4 and students lack opportunities to develop useful skills such as public speaking.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

Leadership and management in English are good.

- The subject leader provides steady support and structure for a diverse, committed and competent team. Their willingness to respond imaginatively to changes in the National Curriculum and GCSE specifications, to show initiative and to learn from their own and each other's experience, drives improvement. Lesson observations are detailed and the judgements well-founded but they are not routinely followed up to ensure that teaching is consistently strong.
- Realistic and thorough self-evaluation has shaped strategies to modernise the curriculum and to strengthen achievement. Students' evident enjoyment of the subject and their level of attainment indicate that capacity for further improvement is good.

Provision for gifted and talented students in English

- The most able students are presented with challenging texts, topics and approaches. They are encouraged to be critical thinkers, to be self-evaluative and to set themselves ambitious targets. Extensive use of technology promotes independent learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- establishing consistency of best practice in teaching by:
 - ensuring that progress in the areas for development identified through lesson observations is systematically monitored
- further extending the breadth and variety of experience offered to students by:
 - developing a more substantial 'enrichment' programme in Key Stage 4 to complement the English core 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/local Learning and Skills Council and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Patricia Metham
Her Majesty's Inspector