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Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 17-18 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 themes 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 six lessons in English. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English are very high and achievement is outstanding.

- Standards are well above average at the end of all key stages. Nearly all students achieve A*-C grades in both English language and English literature at GCSE with large numbers gaining A*/A grades. There is a similar picture in the sixth form. Standards in A level English literature are very high and most girls achieve grades A/B.
- Standards on entry to the school are very high but reducing slightly. The contextual value added data and other evidence show that achievement is very good as students move through the school. Progress at A level is also very strong.
- Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and students with lower attainment on entry also do particularly well.
- Standards in lessons are extremely high, especially in reading, speaking and listening. Students show a very understanding of

challenging texts. They speak confidently and articulately. This is at least partly because English makes a very good contribution to students' personal development through its emphasis on activities that develop confidence, group work and public debates.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning of English is outstanding.

- Students speak very highly of their English teachers. They enjoy lessons which are lively and interactive, and challenge them to think for themselves. Students praise the enthusiasm, energy, commitment and support of their English teachers.
- Lessons observed were all good or outstanding. They were characterised by very good subject knowledge and the effective use of a range of strategies that involved students well. Relationships and classroom management were very strong. Teachers made very good use of challenging materials and had consistently high expectations of students' progress. There was a consistency to teaching across the department and different key stages, including the sixth form.
- Nevertheless, there were times when the lesson objectives chosen by teachers were too much focused on activities rather than learning, and opportunities were sometimes missed to give students space to explore texts for themselves before teachers provided guidance.
- In discussion, students showed a good understanding of how to improve their work in English. The best marking in English helps by being both detailed and providing guidance on next steps. However, the quality of marking is variable across the department especially in its regularity and in giving clear pointers for improvement.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is outstanding.

- The curriculum in English engages all students well and enables them to make very good progress and reach high standards.
- Reading is at the centre of the English curriculum. Students read a wide range of challenging texts including many classic texts as well as those from different cultures. The department promotes independent reading very well through programmed time for personal reading, supported by discussion and recording personal response in reading logs. Wider reading is also well supported by the extensive range of library resources.
- Poetry is taught regularly, with knowledge and enthusiasm.

- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is currently being revised to reflect recent developments. There is a good emphasis on the study of literary texts but more time needs to be found for non literary and media texts. Scrutiny of students' work shows that much of the writing is in response to the study of literary texts and students need more opportunities to write for a wider range of purposes and forms.
- Speaking and listening are well developed and lessons include numerous opportunities for discussion as well as drama, group work and more formal debates.
- Students' experience of English is considerably enhanced by an effective programme of enrichment activities. This includes regular opportunities to visit the theatre, drama performances in school, debates and university lectures. The department also contributes to the school's curriculum enrichment days, working closely with other subject areas.
- The school provides a well managed and extensive programme of support for some of the lower attaining students. This involves withdrawal sessions taught by teaching staff, focused mainly on improving aspects of reading. This represents a considerable commitment to improving standards of some of the less academic students in the school.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management in English are outstanding.

- The head of department is passionate about English and has a high degree of subject knowledge. He provides very good leadership because he has a clear view about the nature of the subject and how students should experience English. He is well supported by the second i/c English, who leads on Key Stage 3 issues, and other members of the department. The department is not complacent. It is reflective and self-critical, always seeking to improve provision for students.
- Teachers work well together, creating and sharing resources. There is a consistency across the department in their approach to lessons and their commitment to literature. This gives a good and clear sense of purpose.
- The school's self-evaluation in English is accurate. Expectations are high. There is a clear process for reviewing performance and planning development. Lesson observations are well used both by members of the department and the senior leadership team to inform an accurate view of teaching. The use of other strategies such as work sampling and formal feedback from students is less systematic at present.
- The department is reasonably stable at present and has a strong team of specialist teachers. They are well supported by a wide

range of resources and teaching ideas, especially in relation to literary texts. The capacity for further improvement is good.

Creativity in English

The department has reviewed recent changes to the curriculum in English and explored the concept of creativity in English. There is a clear commitment to students developing an independent voice and expressing personal views in response to challenging literary texts. Creativity is well enhanced through the wide range of extra-curricular activities such as drama and public debates. Many of the lessons observed gave students good opportunities to respond creatively to the texts they read. A current focus of the department is to increase opportunities for students to work independently; this happens more in the sixth form than in the preceding years.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- reviewing the balance of literary and non literary/media texts in the curriculum and ensuring that students have opportunities to write across the full range of genres in English.

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

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