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Mr A Wilcock
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Wilcock

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 10-11 February 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 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 and students' work and the observation of nine lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

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

- Consistently high standards over recent years at Year 9 are matched at Year 11, with a rising trend in GCSE results over the last three years. The proportion of students gaining A*-C in both English and English Literature has been significantly above average, as has the percentage reaching A*-A in English Language. A dip at the highest grades in English Literature last summer did not reflect the school's usual strong performance in this subject.
- Good overall achievement contains some variation between key stages. Progress is strongest at Key Stages 3 and 4, where it has accelerated over recent years. Examination data for the last three years shows that nearly all groups of students achieved well.

- The school is well aware that achievement is not as strong at Key Stage 5, where value-added data indicates that progress has declined over the last two years at AS and A2 levels. The fall is most marked at A2, indicating satisfactory progress. This picture reflects a wider trend across Years 12 and 13. The English faculty is taking rigorous action to arrest this downward movement, particularly through sharply focused monitoring of students' performance. The impact of improvement is not yet fully evident, but current progress during lessons at Key Stage 5 is good.
- Students' high levels of attention during lessons, their extremely good behaviour, and considerable maturity, make a significant contribution to their learning. Students appreciate the extremely good relationships they have with staff.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- The quality of teaching and learning contains some variability, but is predominantly good and sometimes outstanding. Lessons are marked by a sharp focus on the understanding and use of subject terminology and detailed analysis of text. Close attention is given to preparation for examinations, so that skills and understanding are constantly reinforced. Where teaching and learning are outstanding, the addition of humour and a fast pace, together with the skilful use of a wide range of strategies, command high levels of challenge and interest.
- Students' show considerable concentration and engagement during lessons. Questions during whole class discussion readily probe students' understanding by asking for additional thoughts and explanation. Opportunities to read aloud or talk with a partner or small group allow students to take a more active role in their learning, and the faculty is keen to increase these occasions.
- At their most effective, group activities are engineered so that all members of the group contribute to the task, discussion and feedback. This collaborative approach is at a relatively early stage, however. Students are sometimes given too few chances to participate actively during lessons, or are not fully briefed in advance about the purpose of their shared task. When this happens, progress is satisfactory, rather than good or outstanding.
- New systems have sharpened assessment and allow faculty staff to maintain a close scrutiny of students' progress in all year groups. Students say they are happy with the guidance they receive, although some older students would like more. Work is regularly marked and encouraging. Feedback includes targets and pointers for improvement, although these practices are not yet fully embedded.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is good.

- Much has been done to strengthen the curriculum, which is well-balanced and challenging. Planning is thorough and detailed, and new curriculum recommendations at Year 7 have already been extended into Year 8.
- Older students recognise the significant improvements to the curriculum. In particular, they feel the strong focus on subject terminology gives them a strong advantage and has made a real difference to their performance. They also express the view that their English studies are benefitting the quality of their work in other subjects, such as science.
- Greater flexibility and challenge are to be offered by starting GCSE work during Year 9 and introducing AS work during Key Stage 4. The timetable has been adjusted so that coursework is completed earlier, allowing time afterwards for greater in-depth study and examination preparation.
- A good range of support and revision programmes after school and at lunchtime provide additional help for lower-attaining students and those at grade boundaries. Teaching groups are now much smaller for these students, allowing for more individual attention from teachers and teaching assistants, and greater adaptation of work.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management of English are outstanding.

- Significant and recent changes to faculty staff have been managed extremely well, providing a minimum of disruption to students and their work. Extremely strong subject expertise and high levels of commitment and aspiration are powerful features of the faculty's excellent leadership and strong team work. The new head of faculty has high expectations of herself and the department and is working tirelessly to raise the profile of the subject within the school.
- Swift and sustained action has been taken to make improvements to provision at Key Stages 3 and 4. The impact is evident in the rising trends in performance across these year groups and in higher GCSE results.
- The same focused attention is now being applied to Key Stage 5. In particular, assessment is tighter in order to keep a close check on students' progress. Good communication with parents also ensures that they lend their support if their child is at risk of underachieving, and to ensure that coursework is completed on time. Older students recognise real improvement in the faculty, noting its greater focus and strong sense of direction.

- The school's leaders have a clear view of the faculty's strengths and what needs to be done. Students are consulted through questionnaires and discussion in order to gather information, about the quality of provision at Key Stage 5, for example, or to change the choice of texts.
- Substantial action has been taken to improve and extend the curriculum and monitoring has focused closely on the quality of teaching and learning. There is an extensive action plan in support of the faculty's development, although actions have yet to be broken down into small steps so that leaders can measure the full impact of improvements.

Creativity in English

The faculty recognises the need to develop and formalise creativity within its provision. It has made a good start. Valuable enrichment comes through visiting poets, theatre groups and competitions. Cross-curricular links are identified in planning and developing in practice, as are multi-cultural themes and links with wider issues, such as mental health.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- accelerating progress and performance at Key Stage 5.
- providing more opportunities for group work and collaborative learning to encourage more active participation among students during lessons.

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 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

Patricia Davies
Additional Inspector