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Dear Mr Levy

Ofsted survey inspection programme – English and Geography

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Sonya Williamson HMI on 7-8 March 2007 to inspect work in English and geography.

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 lessons in both subjects.

English

The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement & standards

Standards in English are very high at all key stages. Achievement is good overall.

- Attainment in English is well above average on entry to the school.
- Standards in English across all key stages are very high. For example, 94% of pupils achieved grades A*-C in English at GCSE in 2006.
- The contextual valued added data show that pupils make good progress overall from ages 11-16 in English. Pupils achieve especially well at Key Stage 4 while progress at Key Stage 3 is satisfactory.

- Results at Advanced Level in English Literature and English Language are very good. Evidence made available by the school suggests that progress within these courses is broadly average.
- The gap between boys' and girls' achievement in English is far smaller than the national trend and this shows that boys perform particularly well in English.
- The school's own analysis of examination results suggests that there was some under-performance by able pupils at KS3-4 in 2006.
- Work seen during the inspection was above average overall and excellent at GCSE and A level. Standards of speaking and listening are very good; most pupils speak confidently and well, articulating thoughtful responses to the texts they study.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning in English is good.

- This judgement is based on a range of evidence, including: levels of achievement by pupils; lessons observed during the inspection; discussion with pupils; and work sampling.
- Much of the teaching observed was either good or outstanding. However, the sample of lessons observed revealed some variability in quality across the department.
- Strengths of teaching include: good relationships and classroom management; strong subject knowledge; effective support for individual pupils; and good use of pair, small group and whole class discussion.
- Expectations are sometimes too low at Key Stage 3 and some teachers do not make good use of clear learning objectives in planning lessons.
- Assessment practices have improved since the previous inspection. The department is planning a programme of assessment tests and tasks across Key Stage 3 and full attention will be given to assessment of all aspects of English including speaking and listening. Pupils' progress is tracked across the key stage.
- Despite these developments, the pupils interviewed were very uncertain about how to improve their work. The quality of marking varies across the department, although the best is very good. Some marking fails to give adequate feedback about pupils' strengths and weaknesses. The department has recently introduced a policy of curricular targets for pupils but it is too early to judge its impact.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in English is good.

- There are particular strengths to the curriculum provided by the school in English at Key Stage 4 and beyond. A wide range of courses is

available, including English Language and Literature, media studies and drama.

- The school enters nearly all pupils for English Literature. As a result, most pupils obtain two good GCSEs in English.
- The curriculum for English at Key Stage 3 has been improved in the past two years. There is now a clear scheme of work which identifies pupils' entitlement, integrates assessment and links effectively to the Secondary National Strategy. The scheme is structured around units of work based on literary texts. This appears to provide too little detailed study of non-literary and media texts. Work at Key Stage 3 currently lacks challenge and pace, especially for able pupils in English.
- The department provides pupils with a wide experience of literature. This includes the development of independent reading and a range of challenging texts for study at Advanced level.
- Good enrichment activities in English include support for visiting theatre groups and writers in school, together with visits by GCSE pupils to poetry conferences organised by the examination board.
- Discussions with pupils across all key stages reveal a range of responses to English. Most pupils enjoy the subject, especially where teachers plan lessons which have variety and make use of active approaches. Pupils are less positive about the curriculum at GCSE, especially where it leads to repetitive or didactic learning.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management in English are satisfactory.

- There have been a number of improvements since the arrival of the temporary head of department two years ago. A new scheme of work at KS3 provides guidance to staff and assessment procedures have been improved. The head of department has a clear sense of direction and has worked well with colleagues, delegating responsibility appropriately.
- However, the effectiveness of leadership and management are constrained by a number of features over which she has little control. For example, the department currently contains fourteen teachers who take English lessons; many of them are part-time and some are non-specialists. Some teachers only work within one key stage. This arrangement makes it very difficult for the department to meet together formally for joint planning, discussions about the future development of the subject across key stages, or the sharing of good practice.
- Work in English is also constrained at present by weaknesses in accommodation and resources.
- The school's current policy on the role of subject leaders does not extend to a systematic involvement in monitoring and evaluation. As a result, the head of department does not observe teaching across the department or review teachers' planning and pupils' work. This makes

it difficult for her to improve teaching, where this is needed, or to identify areas of good practice and under-performance.

Provision for poetry

Provision for poetry is satisfactory.

- The new scheme of work for Key Stage 3 gives a significant emphasis to poetry in the English curriculum. This has not always been the case, as discussions with pupils make clear. Most older pupils have little recollection of work on poetry in the lower school.
- Year 7 pupils enjoy poetry. By contrast, Y11 pupils are mostly negative about their experience of poetry at GCSE, speaking of repetitive work and limited opportunities for independent learning.
- Pupils enjoy very much the annual GCSE conference which includes talks from some of the poets they are studying.
- Most pupils have very few opportunities to write their own poems during the GCSE or A level English courses.

Inclusion

Inclusion in English is good.

- This judgement reflects the good achievement of pupils overall.
- Most pupils are entered for two GCSE courses in English and boys perform better than the national trend.
- The school's very positive ethos for learning and high expectations support the learning of all pupils.
- Pupils report that most English teachers work hard to provide them with individual support and guidance.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- building greater pace and challenge into the curriculum for English at Key Stage 3
- improving pupils' understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in English through good quality marking and target setting
- extending the role of the head of English in monitoring and evaluating the work of the department.

Geography

The overall effectiveness of geography was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are good overall.

- Overall pupils make satisfactory progress and attain good standards at Key Stage 3 and post-16. They make good progress and attain outstanding results in national examinations at Key Stage 4.
- In Key Stage 4 a large number of pupils attain the higher grades because they are challenged and supported well. In Key Stage 3, pupils are less well challenged and are less sure of how to achieve the highest levels.
- Pupils have good understanding of a range of geographical concepts and use geographical skills well to interpret information. Their locational knowledge and cultural understanding are weaker as there is less focus on these in the curriculum.
- Pupils are well behaved in lessons and have good relationships with their teachers. They particularly enjoy those lessons which give opportunities for group work and active learning.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in geography is good.

- Teachers have very good subject knowledge and use a good range of written resources to enhance pupils' learning. They ensure that pupils are aware of topical issues through frequent reference to well chosen newspaper articles.
- Teachers have effective questioning skills. They pose open-ended questions to individual pupils to check, probe and extend their understanding.
- The majority of lessons use a narrow range of teaching and learning strategies, although this is being extended gradually to address pupils' learning preferences. There is limited evidence of enquiry based learning, independent learning and the use of ICT to support learning.
- Good use is made of pupils' own experiences to help them understand new areas of study and see the relevance of their learning.
- Teachers put good emphasis on pupils' acquisition of key geographical vocabulary but do not always emphasise the literacy skills that would enable students to express their understanding at the highest levels.
- Teachers are conscientious with their marking but do not all make specific reference to how pupils can improve the quality of their geography. Pupils are not given target grades to focus their efforts.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- The Key Stage 3 curriculum shows clear progression of geographical skills. This is shown by the complexity of issues that pupils need to understand and the progression from local to international areas of study. However, the curriculum at this Key Stage does not meet statutory requirements for fieldwork.
- The curriculum at Key Stage 4 and post-16 meets examination board requirements and has good emphasis on fieldwork and revision.
- Although the curriculum is not translated into comprehensive schemes of work, the specialist geography teachers translate the content into effective lessons.

Leadership and management of the subject

Leadership and management of geography are satisfactory.

- Teachers engage frequently with each other about the quality of teaching and learning, showing there is clear capacity for improvement.
- Teachers work together informally to share resources, to make appropriate adjustments to the curriculum and to develop their teaching and learning strategies. However, there are few formal opportunities to share good practice or to plan for future initiatives.
- Staff have access to appropriate professional development.
- Although teachers are aware of some priorities for improvement, there is insufficient monitoring and evaluation of the quality of provision, other than by looking at student outcomes and considering informal feedback from pupils or their parents. There is no monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning, other than informally within the department and occasionally by senior managers.
- Where analysis of test and examination results gives cause for concern, appropriate strategies are put in place to address them.
- Although pupils' attainment is monitored by senior managers, there is no formal tracking or analysis of their achievement. This was identified as an issue in the previous whole school inspection.
- There is no departmental development plan against which to evaluate quality or the impact of change.

Subject issue: the global dimension

Pupils' learning about the global dimension is satisfactory.

- Pupils have adequate knowledge of distant localities and global issues in Key Stages 3 and 4 and good understanding of how local actions affect global priorities at post-16.

- Younger pupils do not study a sufficiently wide range of locations to help them understand how they are linked to other cultures and communities.
- The emphasis on Fair Trade in lessons about farming and industry makes an important contribution to students' understanding.
- The citizenship curriculum provides appropriate opportunities for the development of the global dimension through the consideration of poverty.

Inclusion

The provision for inclusion is good.

- Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive appropriate support.
- Teachers' questioning skills help them identify quickly which pupils need support. They then provide effective support through individual interventions and by giving freely of their time outside lessons.
- There is a lack of evidence for regular use of differentiated approaches or whether all groups of pupils are achieving as well as they should.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- the need to ensure that provision for fieldwork meets statutory requirements
- widening the range of teaching and learning styles and adapting the curriculum to ensure that all pupils' interests are met
- producing a development plan which clearly priorities actions, draws on a wide range of monitoring information and considers how the impact of initiatives on learning might be evaluated
- tracking and monitoring the achievement of pupils to help ensure that they achieve well in relation to their abilities.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop English and geography in the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority. 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
Her Majesty's Inspector