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Mr P Norman  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Norman

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 2-3 July 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 seven lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English are well above average. Students' achievement is outstanding.

- Standards at the end of Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 are very high. The school is a non-selective school within a selective area, and has been identified by the Department for Children, Schools and Families as being amongst the most successful schools in this category in the country.
- At Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 attainment in English is consistently above the challenging targets set by the school. The gap between girls' and boys' attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 is narrower than that seen nationally.

- The great majority of students obtain GCSE grades A\*-C in both English Language and English Literature with a fifth gaining A\*/A grades.
- Standards in English are above average in the sixth form. Achievement is outstanding.

### Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning in English is outstanding.

- All lessons observed were at least good, and the majority of lessons were outstanding because of students' high level of enjoyment and the rapid progress they made.
- A key to this exceptional progress is the quality of classroom relationships. Teachers model for students respect and high expectations and are met with reciprocal affection and a determination to do as well as possible. All lessons have very clear objectives so that students know what and how they will be learning. Approaches to learning are varied and extremely well-planned, with the result that students' learning is impressively accelerated through activities which engage, challenge and inspire them.
- Students enjoy English enormously. They say that it is unquestionably one of the best subjects because of the motivating way it is taught by every teacher. This is why such large numbers pursue their interest into the sixth form.
- Assessment in English is excellent. From Year 7 onwards students are informed of their standards and the next step to take through level guidance sheets. This is tangible evidence of the strides they are making and they are justifiably proud of it. This is also typical of the commitment of all teachers to detailed and supportive assessment which leads to a genuine dialogue about learning.
- Students see themselves as thoroughly involved in the process through well-developed systems for peer and self-assessment. One such procedure is the Paragraph Book in which students regularly reflect on their learning and simultaneously develop their writing skills.

### Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in English is outstanding.

- The curriculum in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 evidently engages students' enthusiasm and commitment, resulting in outstanding achievement. This is also the case with Advanced Level provision in the sixth form.
- Through English and related subjects (drama and communication studies) students pursue a range of courses which closely match their interests and ambitions. The introduction of adult literacy courses and the Creative and Media Diploma into the Key Stage 4 programme is

typical of curriculum planning which looks to optimise students' chances of success. The same is true of Communication Studies, to accompany the Literature course in the sixth form. It is already a popular choice in which students do very well.

- The successful Key Stage 3 curriculum is being further developed to take account of new recommendations. Students have excellent opportunities to write for a range of purposes and audiences. The school has a notable record of encouraging public speaking and debate. Students' impressive abilities to discuss, refine and present their thoughts and interests were very much in evidence during the inspection. Wide reading is promoted through timetabled library lessons and through reading logs in which students review their progress and record their thoughts.
- Assessment is integrated into all courses and carefully staged so the students have a motivating sense of progression both in relation to coursework and exam preparation.
- The well-used resource of the digital projector, and imaginative approaches in lessons to a variety of images and film texts, show the substantial impact of the school's specialist status in the visual arts on the English curriculum.
- Students' experience of English is enriched through an extensive range of activities beyond the classroom. The theatre visits and other trips, and the involvement in public speaking and debating competitions, are examples of appreciated opportunities taken up by large numbers.

## Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management are outstanding.

- The head of department is an outstanding teacher who, in the words of a colleague, 'leads from the front'. Her own principles of student-centred teaching, high expectations, and imaginative approaches to the subject, are shared across all members of the department who operate clearly and successfully as a team.
- The school's procedures to monitor the quality of teaching and learning are extremely rigorous, with students' personal and academic progress absolutely central to the process. The senior leadership team recently judged the work of the department and the quality of its leadership to be outstanding. This inspection confirmed that view.
- Within the department other evaluations go forward as a regular feature, both from staff and students. Students recognise the excellent quality of the teaching and support they receive. They appreciate the fact that teachers bring different styles to their work, but that all operate to the same very high standard.
- The department's improvement plan carefully reflects that of the school. Already the department is seeking to embed assessment for learning more securely in the conduct of lessons, it accepts that this remains a point for development. In the schemes of work and in day-

to-day teaching there is an inclusive principle impressively at work. Mixed ability arrangements are consonant with the school's determination to value and encourage everybody in a spirit of collaboration and equality. Similarly the content of the curriculum is carefully thought through to give students a deep appreciation of their own and other cultures.

- The impact of outstanding leadership is evident in the overall excellence of the work of the department, and the excellent achievement in English of students across all key stages.

### Spelling and handwriting

- In Year 7 spelling is explicitly taught through fortnightly lessons following a published scheme. Students work in pairs of similar ability to learn and test each other with evident effects on motivation and ability. They find these lessons useful, enjoy the staged success that comes their way, and often make dramatic progress over the course of a year.
- After Year 7 spelling is addressed through the well-formulated and consistently applied marking policy.
- The Enrichment department offers targeted and intensive work on spelling and handwriting for students who need it. Around twenty students across the school benefit from a handwriting 'rescue' scheme which enables them step by step to address issues of technique and legibility.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- extending assessment for learning so that all students can identify the progress they make in all 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/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

Mick Saunders  
Additional Inspector