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Mr D Ramsden
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Ramsden

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 7 and 8 December 2010 to look at work in science.

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 eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of science is outstanding.

Achievement in science

Achievement in science is good.

- Students' attainment in GCSE science examinations is above average. The percentage of students attaining two or more A* to C grades fell in 2010 although remained significantly above the national average. There was an increase in the percentage of students attaining the higher A* and A grades and this measure is also above the national average.
- Students make good progress in science between Years 7 and 11, with progress being stronger in Key Stage 4 than Key Stage 3. Year 11 examination results in 2010 indicated that middle and lower ability boys made less progress than their peers. However, the department has taken effective action to tackle this issue and attainment in science is rising.
- Year 13 students attain above average results in A2 examinations. The progress made by students in some post-16 subjects, such as physics, applied science and health and social care is outstanding.

- Students enjoy science and consequently the numbers choosing triple science in Years 10 and 11 and the numbers following science courses in the sixth form have significantly increased during the past few years.
- Students show good attitudes to learning and their behaviour in all the lessons observed was at least good.

Quality of teaching in science

The quality of teaching in science is good.

- Teachers are enthusiastic about the teaching of science and have excellent knowledge of their subject and examination requirements.
- New scientific ideas are introduced regularly to students through contexts that are relevant to them. Students stated they found it helpful when new scientific concepts were linked to practical applications.
- Lessons contain a range of interesting activities that actively engage students in learning.
- Working relationships between staff and students are good and positive. Older students are appreciative of the time that teachers give them during additional revision classes.
- In the best lessons, careful consideration is given to matching activities to the full ability range of students in the class. Students' progress is also checked through careful questioning so that the pace of teaching is well matched to the rate of students' learning.
- On occasions, teachers can talk for too long which slows the pace of learning. In a few lessons, insufficient thought is given to ensuring activities provide an appropriate level of challenge for all students in the class.
- Nearly all the marking seen gave students regular helpful advice about how to improve their work. However, this was not consistently the case.

Quality of the curriculum in science

The quality of the curriculum in science is outstanding.

- Curriculum links are strong with feeder primary schools that are funded through the school's mathematics and science specialism.
- The curriculum is very well balanced in terms of developing students' knowledge and understanding of science and their skills of scientific enquiry.
- Commercial schemes of work provide a sound basis for curriculum planning in Years 7 to 11 and they ensure that statutory and examination requirements are met. Teachers skilfully adapt these schemes of work so that they meet the specific needs of students in their classes.
- A very broad range of science courses is offered to 14 to 19-year-old students, particularly those in the sixth form. These courses meet students' needs and interests extremely well.

- The science curriculum is constantly under review to ensure it best meets students' needs. Sensible plans are being considered to shorten Key Stage 3 and introduce a second vocational course in Years 10 and 11.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in science

The effectiveness of the leadership and management in science is outstanding.

- There is excellent devolved leadership across this large department. The head of science works very effectively with other science leaders to improve provision for all students.
- Systems of monitoring and evaluation are excellent. Science leaders monitor lessons, analyse students' attainment data, sample students' work and teachers' lesson planning and seek staff and students' views. This ensures that science leaders have a clear and accurate view of the quality of provision and students' outcomes.
- A very good plan is in place to further improve students' outcomes.
- The progress of students is monitored very effectively using a centralised tracking system. Underachieving students are quickly identified and a range of intervention strategies is in place to improve their progress.
- Some of the science accommodation, despite staff efforts, provides a poor learning environment.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- increasing the percentage of lessons in which teaching and students' progress are outstanding by ensuring all teachers consistently match activities to the full ability range of students in their class and actively involve them in their learning.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop science in the school.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. Except in the case of academies, a copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Peter Sanderson
Her Majesty's Inspector