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11 March 2011

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Dear Mr Weeks

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: science, and art, craft and design

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit with Stephen Long HMI on 19 and 20 January 2011 to look at work in science and art, craft and design.

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 without their consent.

Science

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of nine lessons.

The overall effectiveness of science is outstanding.

Achievement in science

Achievement in science is outstanding.

- The proportion of students gaining two or more GCSE A* to C grades in science has been well above the national average consistently.
- GCSE A* to C pass rates for all science courses are high.
- The proportion of students gaining the top A* and A grades in physics, chemistry and biology increased significantly in 2010 to well above the national averages.

- Attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 is very high and has improved year-on-year for the last three years. Teachers' assessments show that almost all students achieve the expected Level 5 and a very high proportion achieve higher levels.
- School analyses show that students' progress has improved rapidly over the last three years. All groups of students now achieve well with many exceeding expectations.
- Students made good progress in the lessons observed.
- In lessons, students' behaviour is outstanding and they have excellent attitudes to learning.
- Progression to post-16 science courses at local colleges, including science A levels, is very good.

Quality of teaching in science

The quality of teaching in science is good.

- Teachers are real subject enthusiasts and they communicate this successfully to their students. Relationships are good and teachers are encouraging and supportive. Explanations are very clear.
- Lessons are planned and structured very well. They move at a rapid pace and incorporate a good range of activities which motivates and interests students successfully, builds understanding in suitable steps and reinforces knowledge.
- Students are given some good opportunities to discuss their ideas, to plan investigations independently, and to explore their opinions about scientific issues such as genetic engineering.
- Question and answer sessions are used skilfully and effectively to explore students' ideas. Teachers take care to include students who rarely volunteer answers, to give students time to think when they are struggling to articulate their ideas, and to ask supplementary questions when appropriate.
- Lessons include plenty of practical and experimental work that aid students' learning. Teachers' demonstrations also enhance learning.
- A small minority of lessons observed were satisfactory. Weaknesses included practical instructions which were not sufficiently clear. Nevertheless, these satisfactory lessons also included some good features.
- In lessons, information and communication technology (ICT), including interactive whiteboards and laptops, is used very well to enhance learning. Examples seen included well-prepared effective presentations, videos, illustrated stimulus material, time-lapse photography and an interactive forensic investigation programme. However, students reported that the use of the virtual learning environment is limited. This is associated with the move to the new building and ICT teething problems which have now been resolved.

- Students know their targets and their progress towards these. Strategies to involve students more in self-assessment are developing well.
- Students' progress in science is assessed systematically and very detailed monitoring records are kept. Underachievement is identified and followed up.
- Work in students' books is presented well and marked regularly. Helpful comments are often added which help students understand how to improve.

Quality of the curriculum in science

The quality of the curriculum in science is outstanding.

- The school offers an excellent range of courses at Key Stage 4 which meets the needs of all its students. This includes GCSEs in science, additional science, physics, chemistry and biology, and a vocational course. Students are given very clear advice and guidance about course choice to ensure that this fits in with their future aspirations.
- The stimulating Key Stage 3 curriculum promotes enjoyment of science and increasing numbers of students are choosing to study triple science at Key Stage 4.
- Curriculum enhancement days are used very well to provide additional experiences. Students spoke very positively about these. Enrichment activities, such as trips, visits and speakers also benefit students.
- The new laboratories provide light, spacious, and modern scientific learning environments. This helps to create an atmosphere conducive to learning and to promote enjoyment.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in science

Leadership and management in science are outstanding.

- The curriculum leader has a clear vision and provides strong leadership. She has focused successfully on raising achievement. The track record for improvement is excellent.
- Senior leaders have successfully established a culture that enables science to thrive. The opportunities afforded by the move to the new building to consolidate a very positive learning culture have been utilised well.
- Students' progress is monitored meticulously.
- Very thorough monitoring and evaluation include detailed analyses of science data, lesson observations and scrutiny of students' work. This information is used excellently to plan effective action for resolving any weaknesses identified.
- Effective support is provided to newly qualified teachers and this helps them to develop into capable practitioners.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- further developing the good quality of teaching and learning by refining lesson planning and delivery so that teaching is consistently good and more lessons are outstanding
- developing the use of the virtual learning environment to encourage more independent study.

Art, craft and design

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of nine lessons, including a joint observation with a member of the senior leadership team.

The overall effectiveness of art, craft and design is outstanding.

Achievement in art, craft and design

Students' achievement in art, craft and design is outstanding.

- Students make good progress during Key Stage 3 and thoroughly enjoy their studies so that many more than in most schools opt to do a GCSE in Years 10 and 11. Among this age group, progress is outstanding and attainment is very high for boys and girls, with GCSE results well above national averages. Boys do especially well compared with those nationally.
- At all ages, students demonstrate outstanding attitudes to learning, working very hard in lessons, with most completing homework and many spending extra time in the department during breaks or after school.
- Particular strengths lie in students' progress in handling materials and exploring their creative potential. They develop strong skills in key areas such as drawing, which underpin learning in other processes. For example, they quickly begin to produce high-quality photographic work at Key Stage 4, partly because of their strong grasp of composition and light developed when drawing.
- Throughout their time in the department, students engage very well with the opportunity to respond individually to the starting points set. They cite this as a highly valued feature of subject study. As a result, by the end of GCSE courses, very many students produce pieces which they are rightly proud of and reflect closely their lives and experiences.
- Students are keen to learn about other creative practitioners and know well the value of doing so. Often such critical analysis is carried out to a high level, notably by GCSE students, so as to support their own practice securely. However, occasionally, more often at Key Stage 3, students are not clear enough about the contextual background of the work they are looking at so as to provide a model for their own activities, and their progress is not as good as it could be.

Quality of teaching of art, craft and design

The quality of teaching of art, craft and design is good with outstanding features.

- Teachers are highly committed to the subject and have outstanding subject knowledge across a large team. They work hard to prepare ideas and materials for projects, often 'going the extra mile' in the words of one student, to help them outside lessons and to set up visits.
- Teamwork between staff is very effective. The creative nature of the subject is fostered well through sharing resources and trying out different approaches to projects. The open-plan studios help the sharing of ideas by enabling awareness of what is happening in the different rooms.
- Lessons are managed very confidently. Relationships between students and teachers are excellent. Teachers are skilled at organising resources and supporting students in taking responsibility for their own materials.
- Teachers' demonstrations of practical techniques are of high quality. Students gain a clear understanding of the technical possibilities and are confident in turning to their teachers if they need expert guidance.
- Introductions to work by other artists are good but are a less effective area of teaching. While the references made are skilfully chosen, occasionally, too little emphasis is put on how or why the work was made and on fostering students' skills in analysing it. This is more evident in whole-class teaching at Key Stage 3 than at Key Stage 4, where regular discussion with each student enables in-depth analysis of reference material.
- Visiting and resident artists add much to the breadth of expertise offered to students. At all ages, they make excellent progress when working with artists and seeing at first hand the factors influencing the work made.
- Students' progress over time is monitored closely. Teachers provide high-quality feedback, including in marking. They are particularly supportive of students at GCSE level whose individual needs and potential are well known. Students find the system of tracking, levelling and feedback sheets very helpful in knowing what they need to do to move on.
- Displays of students' work, including at external venues, celebrate good work. However, more could be made of opportunities to help students deepen their awareness of how visual practitioners communicate with audiences, for example by curating their own exhibitions.

Quality of the curriculum in art, craft and design

The quality of the curriculum in art, craft and design is outstanding.

- The curriculum is very popular with students. Key Stage 3 does a very good job in building enthusiasm among all groups of students. A wide range of opportunities is available to study different disciplines at Key Stage 4, including photography and textiles.

- Students are offered varied starting points for subject learning, ensuring an excellent balance between first-hand and secondary sources. The themes studied reflect closely those tackled by creative practitioners. Students welcome the emphasis on exploring their response to their lives and experiences through themes like 'My World'.
- Learning opportunities cover a rich spread of materials and processes in two- and three-dimensions. The department plans to expand further the options at Key Stage 4, and the use of information and communication technology at Key Stage 3, after GCSE students' very positive response to digital photography in recent years.
- Curriculum enrichment is outstanding. Visits to galleries and museums are integral to Key Stage 4 courses and the department is innovative about broadening experiences for younger students through artists coming in for half-day workshops.
- Community engagement is a central feature of the subject. A dedicated community liaison subject teacher spends much of her time carrying out projects with local community groups and working in local primary schools to develop the visual arts. Year 7 students spoke highly of the impact of this on their subject knowledge and skills when in Year 6.
- Effective links are made to other curriculum areas. For example, students make illustrated booklets in connection with work in modern foreign languages and training has been provided for science staff in making three-dimensional models of volcanoes.

Effectiveness of leadership and management of art, craft and design

The leadership and management of art, craft and design are outstanding.

- The subject has benefited from the drive and determination of subject leaders over a prolonged period to secure specialist visual arts status and ensure high attainment and great enjoyment among students. The subject is an integral part of school life, adding much to students' cultural and spiritual development.
- Effective teamwork and high morale among the subject team are the result of supportive management and leadership. High expectations are modelled by subject leaders and staff are empowered to approach teaching in their own way and reflect honestly on it. Staff development is a high priority and links well to subject development needs.
- Monitoring and evaluation are accurate and involve reference to a broad range of assessment data, work scrutiny and lesson observation. Curriculum improvements are identified precisely and the department is ambitious to broaden students' opportunities further. The quality of teaching is known well and strengths are shared and sustained. However, actions to improve weaker areas of practice are less well focused or monitored than those for curriculum development.

- Subject staff work hard to make connections outside the school so as to enrich students' learning. They remain well aware of subject developments nationally, including changes to examination requirements and course specifications. This, alongside involvement in their own creative practice, underpins a secure understanding of what constitutes challenging achievement for students and drives the subject forward.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- enhancing strategies at Key Stage 3 for teaching students how to analyse the work of other artists, and monitor more closely how well this is done
- involving students more comprehensively in the process of exhibiting their work to deepen their understanding of how artists engage with audiences.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop science, and art, craft and design 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

Ruth James
Her Majesty's Inspector