

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr M Winter
Acting Headteacher
Bacon's College
Timber Pond Road
Rotherhithe
London
SE16 6AT

Dear Mr Winter

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: science

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 28 and 29 September 2011 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 without their consent.

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 satisfactory.

Achievement in science

Achievement in science is satisfactory.

- The percentage of Year 11 students attaining two or more A* to C grades in science has been above the national average for the past few years.
- The progress made by students between Years 7 to 9 is satisfactory.
- During Key Stage 4, the progress made by students varies between the courses studied. For example, students make good progress in the separate science courses or biology, chemistry and physics but slower progress on the additional science course.
- Too many Year 12 students failed to attain an AS level pass grade in 2011, particularly in biology and chemistry.
- Those students who continue to study science in Year 13 make good progress on the courses they follow.

- Students speak positively about their science lessons and appreciate the support given to them by their teachers. Most students behave well in lessons and have good attitudes to learning. They carry out practical work in a calm, sensible and safe manner.

Quality of teaching in science

The quality of teaching in science is satisfactory.

- All the lessons observed were at least satisfactory and some were good. However, too much teaching is satisfactory to ensure that students make good progress over time.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge and they plan lessons that contain a range of interesting activities.
- Relationships between staff and students are good.
- Teaching assistants give good in-class support to students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, aiding their learning effectively.
- In the best lessons, teachers plan activities that are well matched to the learning needs of all students in their class. However, this good practice has not been consistently established across the department.
- In some lessons, teachers are not making effective use of questioning to check how well all students are acquiring new knowledge and developing their understanding of new concepts.
- Teachers make effective use of information and communication technology to aid students' learning.
- The quality of teachers' marking of students' work is inconsistent across the department.

Quality of the curriculum in science

The quality of the curriculum in science is good.

- Schemes of work are based around commercial publications that have been adapted well by the department so that they meet the needs of students in the college.
- The curriculum has a clear focus on the development of students' skills of scientific enquiry. However, students have too few opportunities to design and carry out whole investigations.
- A broad range of courses is available to students in Key Stage 4 which meets their needs and abilities well.
- The curriculum is well enhanced by a good range of science-related trips, visits and activities including a science week. These activities contribute positively to students' enjoyment of and interest in science.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in science

The effectiveness of leadership and management in science is satisfactory.

- The recently appointed acting head of science and second in science have made a good start in their new roles. They have made a number of changes to the organisation of the curriculum in Key Stage 3 and teaching groups in Key Stage 4. These have the potential to impact positively on students' achievement, but their impact is yet to be seen.
- An analysis of the 2011 examination results and the recently produced self-evaluation document generally accurately identify areas in need of improvement.
- Teaching is being monitored well and science leaders have a good knowledge of the quality of teaching across the department. Science leaders recognise the need to further develop strategies to share and develop good practice.
- Systems to monitor students' progress have recently been improved. Underachieving students are now being identified and provided with appropriate support. This is beginning to accelerate their progress.
- The monitoring of teachers' marking is not sufficiently robust to ensure consistency of good practice across the department.
- An outline departmental improvement plan is currently in place. However, this plan does not clearly indicate specific and measurable success criteria against which the success of actions can be evaluated.
- The department runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis due to effective management structures.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving teaching from satisfactory to good, by ensuring that all teachers plan lessons that are well matched to the learning needs and abilities of all students and make effective use of questioning to check how well they are learning
- ensuring that those students in Year 12 who find the transition from GCSE to A level particularly difficult are provided with sufficient guidance and support to enable them to achieve highly
- ensuring that the departmental improvement plan contains clear, specific and measurable success criteria against which the success of actions can be evaluated.

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.

Yours sincerely

Peter Sanderson
Her Majesty's Inspector