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05 March 2008

Ms J Tinsley
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Dear Ms Tinsley

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Science

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 03-04 March, 2008 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. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with yourself and the deputy headteacher (curriculum and standards), the curriculum leader for science and his second in charge, and with students from Years 7 to 11, informal discussions with teachers, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of twelve part-lessons.

The overall effectiveness of science was judged to be satisfactory. Effectiveness is improving.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in science is satisfactory. Standards are below average.

- Students enter college with standards in science that are below average. They make satisfactory progress overall. A smaller proportion of students reach the national expectations in science at the end of Key Stage 3, or gain a good grade at GCSE in science than in most schools. However, few students studying science, including those with learning difficulties, leave the school without a qualification in the subject.
- The school provides Advanced Subsidiary/Advanced level (AS/A2) courses in chemistry and biology. To date, students have undertaken

these courses having achieved middle grades in double science at GCSE and have generally achieved below average results at advanced level.

- On the whole, students make satisfactory progress in their science lessons. Lower attaining students make the better progress, although the results of recent assessments indicate a generally improving trend in progress for many students.
- Students' personal development within science is satisfactory. Most students have a good attitude to learning. This is more consistently good in the sixth form. However, a minority of students have poor attitudes to learning. In particular they talk during lessons about nothing to do with the subject, distracting teachers from teaching and other students from learning. This does not happen in the best lessons, where all students are fully engaged in learning.
- Some very vulnerable students with very challenging behaviour are taught in the lowest sets. However, such is the range and complexity of needs of some students, not all are able to benefit from what is being provided, and this affects the progress of all students in the class.

Quality of teaching and learning of science

The quality of teaching and learning in science is satisfactory, overall.

- Teaching of the full range of effectiveness, from unsatisfactory to outstanding, was seen during the inspection.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge and have good relationships with students. Humour plays a part in most lessons in science and students interviewed found most science lessons enjoyable. Students felt they learned best when teachers made science relevant to them.
- The main reason for ineffective teaching was unsatisfactory management of behaviour. When inappropriate behaviour was not challenged effectively and teachers tried to continue teaching through the disruption, the learning of all students was affected. Students who behave well resent the disruption caused by the few.
- The best teaching was practical in nature, creative and demanding of students. Behaviour was managed firmly and effectively and teachers showed a strong interest in students' personal development and well-being.
- The work of the higher level teaching assistant was effective and highly valued. Support was most effective when the assistant taught a group of students, working closely with the teacher.
- Teaching post-16 is of good quality. Teachers' subject knowledge is good. They adopt a more mature approach to teaching and learning appropriate to the age of students. They make high level demands of students' knowledge and understanding in line with the advanced requirements of the courses.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the science curriculum is good.

- The department has been successful in adapting the curriculum to the needs and interests of the students. There has been less scope to do this in Key Stage 3, although the adoption of the 'Aim for 5' programme has led to a higher proportion of students reaching Level 5 or above, just below 60%.
- There has been more success in tailoring the curriculum in Key Stage 4. The uptake of double science is low; students' optional choices are more towards the arts in this specialist arts college. However, the adoption of Additional Applied Science is proving a great success and students are putting forward files of high quality for assessment. Also, the decision has been made to make BTEC the core science for next year (2008/09), since this course is judged more appropriate for the majority of students.
- The department is keen to retain its chemistry and biology AS/A2 courses and to offer able girls the opportunity to stay at the college to pursue science courses. These courses are offered to students from other schools in the partnership of secondary schools to which the college belongs. As a consequence, there are boys in both chemistry and biology classes at Years 12 and 13, some of whom are now registered with Holly Lodge.
- The department works with other departments within the college to develop enterprise skills and link science with the visual arts. Outside of the college, the science department has links with some of the many primary schools that send their pupils to Holly Lodge. However, the department has not yet considered how creativity might be fostered within science lessons, although there are some excellent examples of models used by teachers to illustrate important ideas or workings which are not easy to understand.

Leadership and management of science

The leadership and management of science are satisfactory. There are clear signs of improvement.

- The science department has a good ethos. Teachers and support staff work well together as a team.
- The subject leaders have made significant progress in developing a rigorous system of assessment. This is used to track the progress of the one thousand or so students who study science in the college, to identify whether they are in line to achieve their targets and to introduce accountability to the teachers who are responsible for their progress.
- Good progress has also been made in providing better quality guidance for students in their exercise books and files. Marking is now of good quality, recognising what has been learned and guiding students to the next steps required of them.
- Managers scrutinise students' work and undertake informal monitoring of teaching. However, with inconsistency in teaching quality and in

behaviour management, more formal monitoring of teaching and learning is required, to raise the general quality of teaching and learning to good.

- Although significant progress has been made by the relatively new leadership team, outcomes remain below the levels that represent good achievement for the students.

Inclusion

Inclusion in science is satisfactory.

- The needs of most students are met satisfactorily, whatever their ability. A larger than average proportion of students has learning difficulties and each has an individual education plan known to teachers within the science department. Also, despite the large size of the college, teachers know their students well.
- Class sizes are kept small for the lower sets in each year group, assistance is provided to teachers by an experienced higher level teaching assistant, and teachers adapt their approach effectively to meet the varied needs of students with learning difficulties. However, within the lowest sets, some of the most vulnerable students with the most complex needs are not always well served, despite the best efforts of staff. Moreover, in helping the most vulnerable in the lower sets, other students with less complex needs do not make the progress of which they are capable.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving and making more consistent the management of inappropriate behaviour
- improving provision for students with the most complex learning difficulties
- identifying the characteristics of good science teaching and implementing these to raise the quality of teaching and learning.

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

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your Local Authority, Learning and Skills Council and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Brian Padgett
Her Majesty's Inspector