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Mr D Bocock
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Bocock

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Science

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 06-07 February 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 staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of science was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Standards are around the national average and achievement is satisfactory at Key Stages 3 and 4. In the sixth form, standards are at the national average and achievement is good.

- Attainment in science at Key Stage 3 has been around the national average for the past three years. Progress has also been around national average for similar schools. Boys and girls made very similar progress as did other groups such as those from minority ethnic heritage.

- In 2007 the A* - C pass rate in science was at the national average and slightly below the average for other subjects in the school. Attainment in the single science course was in line with predictions from assessment and monitoring.
- However, girls performed less well than boys in science at GCSE in 2007. In addition there is some evidence from current performance data that boys are performing better than girls in module tests.
- In the sixth form, GCE A level pass rates were good in 2007 and high grade passes (A and B grades) in chemistry and physics exceeded 50%.
- Both ALIS and ALPS analyses show that students achieved A Level grade in line with those predicted from prior attainment.
- However, in both biology and chemistry boys achieved higher grades than girls.
- Progression to higher education from science courses is high and sixth formers are well supported in their UCAS applications.
- The standard of work in science lessons is good. Practical work is carried out safely.

Quality of teaching and learning of science

Teaching and learning in science are good.

- Most teaching was good and no inadequate teaching was seen.
- Science teachers are well prepared and teach confidently. They use information and communication technology (ICT) to good effect, especially to interest and engage the less able.
- Science provision for the least able students is good, at an appropriate level and taught in a supportive way.
- Specialist teachers teach separate subjects and students reported that this helps them develop confidence in their studies.
- In the best lessons, extension tasks are part of the aims and objectives that are shared with the students. Small group work is particularly effective in extending students in the sixth form.
- Some practical work was too busy, with too many tasks or too many observations to be made. As a result work was incomplete and plenary sessions were not as effective as they could have been.
- In the least successful lessons a lack of clarity on what the students had to achieve and some confusion as to what they could conclude from the evidence slowed progress.
- Tracking and monitoring of students' progress in science is good. In discussion, Key Stage 4 and sixth form students were clear as to their target grades and the progress they were currently making.
- Assessment for learning is still developing and some staff are using "traffic lights" to help assess progress at the end of lessons.
- Homework is set regularly and returned promptly. However, too much work does not contain indications on what to do to improve. There is little evidence of diagnostic marking and its integration into science department assessment strategy.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the science curriculum is good.

- In Key Stage 3 the scheme of work is comprehensive and fully covers the National Curriculum programme of study. The emphasis is on content, and scientific enquiry is sometimes less evident.
- At Key Stage 4 triple science is offered to the most able. The majority of the students in Key Stage 4 take GCSE core science and additional science and the least able access a single science option. This flexible menu is meeting the needs of the students.
- The curriculum in the sixth form is traditional and GCE biology, chemistry and physics are offered. However, this clearly meets the needs and aspirations of the students, and the progression of students to higher education in the sciences is good.
- Work books and files contain work that illustrates full syllabus coverage and attention to detail.
- A range of science enrichment activities and visits is also employed to enthuse and encourage students.

Leadership and management of science

Leadership and management in science are good.

- The resources of the science department are good. The recently refurbished science block is modern and the laboratories and preparation facilities are good. There is no shortage of specialist equipment and practical work can usually be undertaken on an individual basis at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form.
- The day-to-day organisation of teaching and resourcing investigative work is well run.
- Recent appointments to the science teaching staff have strengthened the department and improvements to teaching and learning have taken place. All teachers have relevant degrees and teaching qualifications.
- In-service training for science teachers has recently focused on assessment for learning and updating skills in non specialist subjects.
- The science department's self assessment and development plan is a sensible document that clearly identifies the main areas for development.

Inclusion

Inclusion is satisfactory

- There is some evidence of lower achievement by girls at both Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form. However, at Key Stage 3 both boys and girls make similar progress.

- The science curriculum offered, particularly at Key Stage 4, is well organised and taught so as to meet the needs of the least able.
- Thoughtful interventions are used to encourage those at risk and exclusions are low in science. Parents are appropriately involved so as to help re-engage individuals.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising attainment in science at Key Stage 3
- investigating differences in performance between girls and boys at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form and developing strategies as necessary
- developing assessment for learning in science.

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 and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Alex Falconer
Her Majesty's Inspector