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Mr Jackman
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Jackman

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Science and Art

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff when myself and Chris Shaw visited the school on 24 – 25 June 2008 to look at work in science and art.

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 parts of lessons.

Science

The overall effectiveness of science was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Overall current standards are around the national average and improving from being well below for some time. Achievement is now satisfactory.

- Students are making satisfactory progress in science. This is clear from the scrutiny of students' work and observation of their responses in lessons.
- Analysis of the school's current data on students' performance in science indicates that standards for 2008 are improving and are likely to be close to the national average at both Key Stage 3 and 4.
- This represents an improvement over previous years where standards in science have been persistently below national averages at both key stages.

- In 2007 standards reached by Year 9 students were below national average and below those reached in English and mathematics. This represented inadequate progress from their starting points on entry to the school.
- Similarly Year 11 students also made inadequate progress and the below average standards reached in GCSE science were amongst the lowest of all GCSE subjects in the school.
- The performance of post-16 students was satisfactory and they are attaining A Level grades close to the national average.
- Students show good attitudes to learning where teaching is stimulating, but in some lessons the pace is not demanding enough to keep them fully engaged.
- Students know the level they are currently reaching in tests and keep records of how this changes. They receive useful feedback from their teachers on responses to individual test questions. However they have a limited understanding of their performance in other areas of work.
- Older students described how some of them had to work a lot on their own last year to make up sections of the GCSE curriculum not covered in enough depth in their lessons.

Quality of teaching and learning of science

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

- Most lessons observed were at least satisfactory. Where teaching was inadequate this was linked to a lack of control of students' behaviour resulting in poor learning as there were too many opportunities for students to drift off task and misbehave.
- Lessons are supported by a detailed scheme of work for each subject that is starting to impact on achievement.
- Teachers frequently rely on worksheets and copying notes from the board in their lessons. This gives students limited opportunities for independent thinking and learning.
- Arrangements for testing are secure and result in performance data that give a reasonably accurate picture of current standards. However, this information is not used consistently by teachers to move their students towards reaching higher levels.
- The quality of marking in students' books is poor. There are few good quality examples of students receiving regular written feedback on how well they are progressing and of being given clear advice on how they can improve further.
- Teaching of investigative science is weak. There are limited examples of a secure experimental approach to practical sessions with most activities being purely illustrative. Few practical activities are underpinned by learning objectives linked to scientific enquiry.
- Students feel that their lessons are too often disrupted by the poor behaviour of others. They are aware that the frequent changes of staff have led to wide variations in the quality of education they receive.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- The Year 7 curriculum introduced recently in all subjects is much more closely linked to students' needs and interests. Science has contributed to the new 'flexibility' programme that is part of this provision.
- The current Year 8 and 9 curriculum gives adequate coverage of all the content areas of science but scientific enquiry is not a strong integral part of provision.
- At GCSE staffing shortages and falling standards have resulted in the majority of students taking only one science GCSE although it is hoped this situation will improve as standards continue to rise.
- At A Level the choice in science is limited to the three sciences, physics, chemistry and biology, and no applied science course is offered.
- Extra-curricular activities in science are limited. A few students regularly attend a science club.
- Extra revision sessions both after school and during the holidays are very popular and well attended. They have made a considerable contribution to the current improvements in achievement.

Leadership and management of science

Leadership and management in science are unsatisfactory.

- Science is managed in the context of a school where accountability is clear and there is strong senior leadership involvement and support with intervention strategies focused on raising standards.
- This has set a clear agenda for improvement in the department that will be further supported by the appointment of a new Director of science from September 2008.
- Self evaluation practices leading to improvement within the department are not strong and are not leading to higher standards. Senior leadership have a much stronger approach to monitoring and evaluating the work of the department that is leading to current improvements.
- The work of the department has been affected significantly by staff changes and recruitment difficulties. Some classes have had several teachers in a year with weaker teachers receiving considerable support from the senior management team. The science department itself has not managed this situation well and consequently too many students have received an inadequate quality of science education in the past.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring greater consistency in analysis and marking of students' work to give them feedback on their successes and what they need to do to improve
- raising the expectation of all teachers such that there is a consistently good or better pace in lessons, and that all students are challenged to work to the best of their ability

- making sure that all practical science activities incorporate learning objectives that are clearly linked to scientific enquiry.

Art

The overall effectiveness of Art and design was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards in art and design are good.

- Students enter the school with average skills, knowledge and understanding in art, and they respond well to the systematic teaching.
- Standards are above average by the end of Year 9. Students develop a range of skills in different media and are able to express their ideas clearly. A good proportion of students are able to select and develop different ideas from their visual research, refining and manipulating them creatively. For example when making masks based on Venetian models students incorporate a wide range of influences and styles. Some ideas develop from the students' own personal experiences and imagination, others are developed from an exploration of different materials and processes.
- The GCSE courses are popular because teachers inspire students to develop a creative, individual approach through hard work and genuine enthusiasm for the subject. As a result, students make good progress and standards are generally above average in both fine art and textiles. Standards in the 2007 examination were average overall, with a good proportion of A* and A students, indicating a dip in performance trends because standards are back on track this year with a very high proportion of students expected to gain A*-C grades.
- Standards in sixth form art and design are more variable from year to year. The size and ability of groups also varies considerably. This includes students who start AS and A Level with below average qualifications. They make good progress due to the expert and dedicated teaching and the highly creative atmosphere. In 2007 standards in fine art and textiles were average overall but those in photography were well below average. It is recognised that limited timetable provision was a contributory factor. Nonetheless, predicted grades are higher for the current cohort and students will benefit from increased timetable hours next year.
- Teachers ensure that students are able to write and explain their processes and thinking clearly. This enables them to develop their ideas systematically. Some inspiring work in digital image manipulation has given students an insight into the way that artists think and work which has enriched their own paintings and constructions.
- Students say that life in the art department is both enjoyable and hard work. They respond to the relaxed one-to-one approach with interest and enthusiasm as well as good behaviour. The high expectations and consistent standard of discipline help them feel safe and appreciated. Students of all abilities know that they will be rewarded when they do well and challenged appropriately when they under-perform.

- Relationships are good. Older students are happy to give up their time after examinations to help the younger ones in class, who appreciate and are encouraged by seeing the more advanced work around them.

Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching and learning in art and design are good.

- The teaching is lively and challenging. Students are inspired by stimulating visual displays and demonstrations with good examples they can aspire to. Teachers take care to explain techniques and processes thoroughly.
- In the best lessons high expectations are explicit and students are clear about what they are expected to achieve; they respond with hard work to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding.
- Teachers assess students' work regularly and this influences the way that lessons are planned and prepared with good use made of grouping and targeted support. Marking is encouraging and most indicates clearly how to improve. In examination classes the use of specific marking criteria increases students' responsibility for their own learning.
- At Key Stage 3 students know their target National Curriculum levels but are not always clear about how this relates to their work in the lesson because the expected outcomes are not usually expressed in these terms. This sometimes limits how well they can improve their own work without teacher intervention.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is good.

- Coverage of the National Curriculum is thorough, with a very well-planned programme of practical activities. This is coupled with an imaginative series of topics that helps broaden the students' understanding of the historical and contemporary aspects of art and design and other forms of cultural expression such as fashion, architecture, decoration, graphic design, photography and advertising. The department is not afraid to tackle challenging issues and provocative aspects of modern art, making them accessible and relevant to the students.
- The GCSE and A Level courses encourage students to make more individual responses and enable them to begin to think like artists and designers. In a recent topic on how objects can stimulate memories, students visited a local centre for the elderly and made an intensive record of their meetings with drawings, words, photographs and memorabilia. This resulted in moving and evocative work around the themes of childhood which incorporated the students' own memories and objects.
- Students are encouraged to pursue their own interests, which are stimulated by a range of visits to galleries, colleges, museums and exhibitions. In addition the school's business and enterprise specialism

makes an impact on the professionalism with which they tackle magazine design, school productions and presentation generally.

- The recently introduced courses in photography for the sixth form are also having a simulating effect on work with the younger students: computer software enables them to quickly juxtapose images and try ideas before venturing into more substantial media. However, there have been fewer opportunities to draw and paint from direct observation to strengthen the students' understanding of form and structure in a more concrete way.
- The textiles courses are effective in promoting very rich and colourful responses from the students who incorporate ideas drawn from natural forms as well as those inspired by popular culture and high fashion.
- The opportunity to learn from the local and wider community and each other, the insistence on collaboration and cooperation and the development of writing and speaking skills also help contribute to students' future economic success.
- The art department has recognised the need to extend the available range of media, for example in print, sculpture and ceramics and sixth form students say that they sometimes suffer from a lack of specialist space in which to work.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are good.

- The committed and enthusiastic joint heads of art work well together despite the constraints of one being part time. They are well supported by a knowledgeable and committed arts faculty leader and an equally encouraging senior management team.
- The strength of the leadership lies in providing students with a warm, encouraging and yet rigorous and demanding ethos.
- Subject leaders set and reach challenging targets for the students. Their analyses of students' achievements over time are also effective in developing measures that promote the continuing popularity of art and design, improve examination results and develop good teaching.
- The overall strategic view and planning for the future is satisfactory. Whilst self-evaluation has clearly led to important improvements, the impact of national initiatives such as vocational education, the new diplomas or the new Key Stage 3 curriculum have yet to be considered.

The impact of assessment on the progress and creativity of learners

The use of assessment is good.

- The expert help and advice teachers provide during the lesson and through their marking meets the needs of all students including those with learning difficulties or disabilities and those with a special gift for art and design. The students' progress is monitored so that it is easy to spot who is falling behind or exceeding expectations.
- The development of self and peer assessment helps students become more involved in taking control of their own learning. Imagination and

creativity are assessed as well as skill, effort and competence using a simple 'traffic light' system.

- In Years 7 to 9, whilst students are clear about what they are expected to do during the lesson, they do not always understand what they are expected to learn, for example how the work they are doing relates to National Curriculum targets the school split into one-third levels.
- In the GCSE and A Level lessons teachers give students a clear understanding of how well they are doing and how to assess their own work against clear objectives and examination criteria such as the mark scheme. This enables students to make individual judgements about their own work and progress and increases their independence and freedom of expression.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving the consistency with which teachers involve students in assessing their own individual progress by ensuring that learning objectives in lessons are more clearly linked to their understanding of National Curriculum targets
- improving strategic planning by linking the department's self-evaluation with the consideration of whole-school and national initiatives.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop science and art 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

Christine Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector