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Mrs Lawrence  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Lawrence

Ofsted survey inspection programme – science and history

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during our visits on 25, 26 and 27 June to look at work in science and history.

The visits 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 learners, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of 16 lessons or part lessons.

Science

The overall effectiveness of science was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Standards are above the national average and achievement is good.

- Students make good progress in science throughout their time at the school.
- At Key Stage 3 standards are very high. For example, in 2007 over half the students attained level 6 or above.
- All students achieve well during Key Stage 3, but boys' achievement exceeds that of girls.
- GCSE results are also good. In 2007 in Double Award Science the A\*-C pass rate was above the national average and almost a quarter of students achieved the top grades of A or A\*.
- GCE A Level pass rates are around the national averages. Value added data indicate that most students achieve grades that are in line with expectations given their prior attainment.

- Students' attitudes to learning and behaviour in the lessons observed were very good.

## Quality of teaching and learning in science

Teaching and learning in science are good.

- Teachers are committed, hard working and enthusiastic. Their subject knowledge is very good.
- Lessons include a variety of activities which motivate students and involve them in their own learning.
- Teachers have high expectations of their students, which encourages them to aim high.
- Learning materials, such as worksheets, are well presented and effective.
- Good use is made of information communication Technology (ICT) in lessons.
- In most of the lessons observed a good pace was maintained.
- Students know the target levels or grades they are aiming for. Lessons often include useful references to the requirements of specific levels or grades, which help students to understand what they need to do to achieve these.
- Good use is made of practical and experimental work.
- There were some very good opportunities for personal development in the science lessons observed, for example through group work and presentations.
- Some effective use is made of self-assessment and peer-assessment.
- Lesson objectives are often shared with students and reviewed at the end of the lesson. This helps students to understand the purpose of the lesson and to consider what they have learned.
- Some small classes for lower ability students enable teachers to give particularly effective individual support.
- Documentation used by teachers for lesson planning is in different formats.
- The marking of students' work shows inconsistencies.

## Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in science is good.

- Curriculum developments include the introduction of Key Stage 4 courses into Year 9, with the aim of ensuring that students are offered courses that best meet their needs at the earliest possible stage.
- The range of courses offered at Key Stage 4 meets the needs of students with different aptitudes and abilities. Courses include GCSE core science and additional science, and the two GCSE equivalent National Award. There are plans to introduce triple science (physics, chemistry and biology) for more able Key Stage 4 students from September 2008.
- Good use is made of approaches such as 'Aim 4 five' during Key Stage 3 to promote interest, motivate students and so help raise achievement.
- There are appropriate enrichment activities, such as the recent opportunity for selected students to meet Russian Cosmonauts.

- In the sixth form there is an appropriate range of science courses, including biology, chemistry, electronics and physics.

## Leadership and management

Leadership and management are very good.

- There is a clear focus at all levels on raising the achievement of all students, including those of lower ability.
- Day-to-day operational management is highly effective.
- The Head of Department designate is making very good use of her role with the local authority to develop networks and bring new ideas to science teaching and learning.
- Documentation for the various courses is comprehensive and includes a range of useful materials.
- A thorough analysis of results is carried out and used to plan specific improvements.
- Leaders have sought to address specific issues through innovative projects, such as single gender grouping in Key Stage 3, and the introduction of national award in science. It is too early to fully evaluate the success of these but early signs are encouraging.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- further developing strategies to share good practice in teaching and learning in science
- improving the consistency of marking of students' work in science and the guidance given to individual students about how they can improve
- continuing to develop strategies to raise the achievement of girls in science, particularly at Key Stage 3.

## History

The overall effectiveness of history was judged to be good.

## Achievement and standards

Standards are above average and students' achievement is good.

- Learners make good progress across Key Stages 3 and 4 and reach above average standards in their GCSE examinations. Good support from teachers and teaching assistants ensures that all students do well.
- Perusal of the school's tracking data and discussions with Year 11 students reveal that students entered for the examinations this year are on course to reach their challenging targets and that standards continue to be above average.
- Students in both key stages have a perceptive understanding of the nature of evidence and are fully aware of the pitfalls sometimes inherent in using it. Students in Year 11 in particular recognise the importance of judging the past on its own standards and values.
- Standards at advanced level are average. Students enjoy the challenge of more advanced study in history and overall make good progress.

- History is a popular subject in school and more students opt for further study at GCSE level than is usually found. Students behave very well, are fully engaged in their lessons and speak highly of their teachers.

### Quality of teaching and learning in history

The quality of teaching and learning is good and there are examples of outstanding practice in Key Stage 3.

- Teachers have a secure knowledge of their subject and try hard to motivate and enthuse them. Relationships are good.
- Planning and lesson preparation are good and teachers link lesson objectives well to students' prior learning.
- Teachers' questions challenge their students to think more deeply about the subject matter and also demonstrate the high expectations they have of the standards their students can reach, irrespective of their levels of ability.
- Students benefit from the use of group work in most lessons but on occasions activities are directed too much by teachers and students do not have sufficient opportunities to take more responsibility for their own learning.
- The ongoing assessment of students' performance in class is good but the quality of assessment in Key Stage 3 is inconsistent and teachers do not always have a fully accurate view of their students' performance. As a result, learning targets do not focus sufficiently on the skills which students need to improve.

### Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is good.

- Students' well-founded comments on how historians make their judgements demonstrate that the curriculum places appropriate emphasis on their acquisition of historical skills. They also have a clear understanding of the dangers of bias and prejudice.
- Students enjoy their history and increasing numbers are opting for further study in Years 10 and 11.
- The department has spent much time considering the implications of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum in history and is introducing a more thematic approach.
- Students speak warmly of the range of enrichment activities, including the trip to the First World War battlefields, but comment that they would like even more.
- Following an evaluation of performance in Years 12 and 13, the department has made detailed amendments to the curriculum in the sixth form and new courses are planned for September 2008.

## Leadership and management of history

The leadership and management of history are good.

- Provision in history is improving, and the head of department leads her talented and hard-working team by example.
- The department is committed to ongoing improvement in achievement and standards in history. However, self-evaluation is often informal and is not always sharp enough, particularly in Key Stage 3, to ensure a completely accurate view of students' performance.
- By placing greater emphasis on the analysis of examination performance and on the effective use of ICT, the department is well set to raise standards even higher.
- Resources produced by members of the department are of good quality and both motivate and challenge students of all ability levels well.
- The department runs well on a day-to-day basis and staff are always more than willing to share ideas and resources for the benefit of their students.

## Subject issue: ICT in history

- The department has a member of staff with specific responsibility for the development of ICT as a teaching and learning tool and she has developed close links with the school's ICT coordinator.
- Over the past years much has been done to update the department's audio-visual resources and good progress has been made in introducing new ICT activities, used by staff and students alike.
- Students in the department use *Movie Maker* with skill and verve and have produced impressive presentations on their interpretations of the key features of the First World War.
- Staff have received training on the use of the *Virtual Reality Room* and one particular group of students has already enjoyed examples of Medieval daily life within it.

## Subject issue: provision for the gifted and talented in history

- The department is working hard to modify the curriculum to meet the needs of gifted and talented students more closely and levels of challenge for these students are generally high.
- Gifted and talented students in history are invited to attend a history fieldwork excursion to museums of interest in the Newcastle area. The activity includes a visit to Hadrian's Wall where students work alongside a leading archaeologist and use their ICT skills to produce a DVD of their findings.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring consistency in assessment practice, particularly in Key Stage 3, to establish a clearer picture of performance so that students can be informed more accurately about how they can improve their work

- introducing more formal systems to monitor and evaluate the work of the department with increasing rigour.

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

Jim Kidd  
Additional Inspector