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Mr J Blakebrough
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Blakebrough

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Science

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 27-28 April 2009 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: analysis of data, interviews with staff and learners, scrutiny of relevant documentation, students' work and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of science was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Overall standards are above average and achievement is good.

- At Key Stage 3 standards are above average with above average proportions of students achieving the higher levels. However, the proportion of students attaining at least the expected level was slightly below average in 2007 and 2008.
- Data which take account of students' prior attainment and contextual factors show that in 2007 Key Stage 3 students achieved very well.
- The proportion of students gaining at least two GCSE grades A*-C in science subjects in 2007 was well above the national average. The equivalent figure for 2008 was slightly below national average.
- For the cohort of students who completed their GCSE courses in 2008 the results are indicative of satisfactory progress and achievement.
- School assessment data and the results of GCSE science module examinations show that current students in Year 10 and Year 11 are on track to achieve much better results than in 2008.

- Standards in the sixth form are above average. GCE A level pass rates were all high in 2008 and high proportions of students achieved high grades in biology, chemistry and physics.
- Value added data show that in 2008 both AS and A level students made good progress from their starting points.
- In the majority of lessons observed students made good progress.
- In most lessons the majority of students behave well and demonstrate good attitudes to learning.

Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching and learning in science are good.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge. They are lively and enthusiastic, and they convey their enthusiasm for their subjects to their students.
- Lesson plans follow a common format which includes differentiated learning objectives, and information about students with additional learning needs. However, in some cases planning is not sufficiently focused on precisely what students are expected to learn and how they are to learn it.
- There is much whole class teaching which works well much of the time for many students. However, on occasion, some individuals or groups do not make as much progress as they could.
- A good range of learning activities is included in lessons to engage interest, motivate students and develop understanding.
- Good use is made of practical work which offers opportunities for students to learn through hands-on experiences.
- In the best lessons teachers are adept at monitoring the progress of individuals and targeting support where it is most needed. Astute direction and interventions help to ensure that all students continue to think, learn and develop their understanding.
- Relationships between teachers and students are good.
- Good use is made of information and communication technology, especially electronic whiteboards. Imaginative presentations which are well illustrated support learning.
- Some effective use of question and answer was seen.
- Teachers' explanations are clear.
- The majority of the lessons observed were good and no unsatisfactory teaching was seen.
- Students interviewed were very positive about science lessons which they enjoy.
- Students know their individual targets and the levels they are working at.
- Teaching assistants offer effective support to individuals and groups in lessons.
- The marking of students' work is generally supportive and often includes comments to help students improve their work. Students' books are mostly well organised and presented.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in science is good.

- There is a range of courses at Key Stage 4 that meets the needs of most, but not all, students. Courses include GCSEs in physics, chemistry and biology as well as science and additional science.
- There are some opportunities for independent investigative work but there is scope for increasing this.
- In Key Stage 3 the science curriculum is beginning to be developed to include a stronger focus on 'How science works' and skills development.
- There are some appropriate enrichment activities in science, including a science club, visits and events which students clearly enjoy.
- In the sixth form GCE AS and A levels are offered in physics, chemistry, biology and applied science. Applied science offers a progression route in science for those who have not achieved the higher grades at GCSE and it is valued by students.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are good.

- The transition to the new Key Stage 4 curriculum coincided with a period when there were staffing issues and staff changes in science and these factors contributed to the decline in outcomes noted for 2008.
- Leaders and managers at all levels are now demonstrating a clear commitment to raising achievement in science.
- A range of strategies have been introduced to address the issues identified in Key Stage 4 in 2008. In addition to generic strategies to improve the quality of teaching and learning the school has implemented changing syllabus, changes to the timing of module tests, additional opportunities for improving internal assessment marks, booster sessions and more focused revision strategies.
- Evidence of the school's success in implementing raising achievement strategies historically can be seen in the improved high grades and value added in GCE A level sciences in 2008.
- School tracking systems have been refined and improved to provide a clearer picture of individual performance compared with target grade at more frequent intervals. This is being used to identify underachievement at earlier stages in science and to plan earlier interventions.
- Continuing professional development includes in-house sessions on aspects of teaching and learning, awarding body courses and some additional science specific courses.
- Departmental documentation is thorough and comprehensive.
- Day-to-day operational management is effective.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- further developing raising achievement strategies, for example by ensuring that the wealth of assessment data is used effectively in planning lessons to meet all student needs
- developing opportunities for more independent investigative work

- considering how the curriculum at Key Stage 4 might be adapted to better meet the needs of less able students.

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

Ruth James
Her Majesty's Inspector