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Mr G Lobbett
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Lobbett

Ofsted survey inspection programme – science

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 15 and 16 October 2009 to look at work in science.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of science, the visit had a particular focus on transition within and between phases; the range of learning experiences provided; the status and use of scientific enquiry and how science works; the range of science courses offered in Key Stage 4 to meet the needs of all students; and the range of science courses offered post-16 to meet the needs of all students.

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 the school leadership team, staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of science was judged to be good.

Achievement in science

Achievement in science is good.

- Validated data for the school show science to be significantly above the national average for standards at GCSE. The school's own data show that, by the end of Key Stage 3, the proportion of students achieving Level 5 is significantly higher than that seen nationally.

- Within the school, the outcomes for science at GCSE are significantly above the average for the school.
- There is no significant difference between the good progress made by students of all groups.
- Students are less successful at post-16 courses in science at AS and A level. Analysis of examination outcomes shows the standards to be satisfactory overall.
- The standards seen in lessons and in the scrutiny of work shows progress to be good overall.
- Students demonstrate good personal development in the way they act responsibly; they show the ability to work independently and to collaborate well with others.
- For the most part, students enjoy their learning in science and their behaviour is good. On occasions, it is outstanding.

Quality of teaching of science

The quality of teaching in science is good.

- Most lessons observed were good or better. In good lessons, teachers provide a good range of activities that are matched well to the needs of students.
- Teachers are effective at using questions and answers to engage students and check their understanding and progress.
- In interview, students describe the teaching they receive as at least good and some as outstanding. They enjoy the variety of work but do not enjoy copying notes, although this rarely happens.
- Students enjoy being active and participating in lessons. They demonstrate their keenness to answer teacher's questions and raise questions of their own.
- Planning of activities is done by staff collaboratively and has resulted in a coherent programme of study that meets the needs of a large majority of students.
- Assessment is carried out systematically and thoroughly. The department is introducing the assessment of students' progress materials to be used alongside testing procedures to produce a coherent system.
- The students are positive about the feedback they receive from teachers but they make the point that it varies between teachers. Scrutiny of students' work shows some inconsistency in the rigour and usefulness of the marking.
- Relationships between students and teachers are very positive overall. Students are grateful for the enthusiasm of their teachers and describe them as 'always willing to help'.

Quality of the science curriculum

The curriculum for science is outstanding.

- The curriculum is sophisticated and provides a wide range of possible routes designed to provide students with a personalised curriculum.
- Currently Key Stage 3 is two years long providing a purposeful and relevant course in science that leads all students to study core science in Year 9. A large proportion of students, well above the national average, are successful at gaining grades A* to C in science in Year 9.
- There is a good range of courses other than vocational in Years 10 to 11. Some students complete GCSEs in science in Year 10 and move on to study AS science subjects in Year 11.
- There are thus many combinations of GCSE, AS- and A-level qualifications, International Baccalaureate available to students to be studied from Year 9 to Year 13.
- Students are very positive about the wide range of enrichment and extra-curricular activities available to them. Students participate, for example, in trips to NASA to participate in space studies.
- Through staff expertise and enthusiasm, a school space centre has been established that is supported well by students.

Effectiveness of leadership and management of science

Leadership and management of science are good.

- The senior leadership team has created a positive environment for development and improvement in science.
- The leadership and management of the science department have established effective team working. Members of the department feel they are involved in developments and that their views are valued.
- Much work is carried out collaboratively, for example, the planning and implementation of schemes of work. There are good opportunities for staff to share good practice. Staff feel well supported.
- Rigorous and consistent monitoring and target-setting are helping to raise standards.
- The departmental planning process has identified relevant areas for development. Priorities, such as a focus on improving course work at GCSE, have had a positive impact.
- The department clearly works in a coherent way with shared priorities, for example, good science education involves participation and activity.
- The department is run in a way that ensures students are working as scientists and they very much appreciate the good quality science education they are receiving.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- focusing on improving the progress made by students in the sixth form
- improving consistency in the quality of marking and of the feedback given to students on their standards and how they can improve.

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

Ian Richardson
Her Majesty's Inspector