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Mr M Green
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Green

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Science

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 13-14 October 2008 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 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 you and the science subject leader, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of science was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Standards are higher than the national average. Achievement overall is satisfactory.

- Standards in Key Stage 3 have declined since 2006 from a point where they were significantly above the national average. In the same period students' achievement, which takes into account contextual factors, fell from the school being in the top 5% nationally for science to 58% in 2007 and a further fall in 2008 (from school's unvalidated data).
- There has been significant turbulence in staffing, the impact of which the school has minimised by allocating as many permanent staff as possible to the GCSE courses and to the sixth form. This rational and

well justified approach led to classes in Key Stage 3 having a large number of different supply teachers. This inconsistency in teaching has contributed to the decline in standards.

- Standards seen in Key Stage 4 in 2007, the last set of validated data available, show GCSE performance for A*-C grades to be significantly above the national average. The GCSE results in 2008 improved on this. In 2007 girls reached significantly higher standards than boys.
- The school's GCSE performance data show that science results are below other core subjects in which the very large majority of students take the GCSE examinations.
- The sixth form examination results, when considered against national data, show satisfactory to good performance in 2008. The results were a little more positive in 2007 i.e. a slight decline in 2008.
- Students in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form are aware of how well they are doing and they value the guidance they receive from staff and the help they receive to improve. Students in Key Stage 3 are less clear about their attainment and less positive about the guidance received.
- Students in Year 9 have found being taught in sets helpful and they believe being put into sets earlier would have helped them more. During interviews students described some slowing of pace in learning, where there was lack of challenge by teacher and poor attitudes of a few students.
- A scrutiny of students' work showed standards to be at least satisfactory.
- Students are well behaved in class and around the science department. They take on roles and responsibilities in lessons and are showing good personal development.

Quality of teaching and learning of science

Teaching and learning are good.

- Interviews with students make it clear that they value the teaching they receive. The older the students the more this is so, and they speak of the high levels of support and willingness to help that their teachers display.
- The majority of teaching seen was of good quality and some was outstanding. In the best lessons students were well engaged in a good variety of activities that required their participation and challenged them appropriately.
- Where the pace of the lesson slowed, and the work was not as well targeted at meeting the needs of a range of pupils, there was some off task behaviour and students became less engaged in work.
- There was some good use of assessment that was targeted at improving learning. The use of traffic light cards and white boards that require every student to make a response had a positive impact on levels of engagement. The quality and quantity of written formative comment was inconsistent.
- A joint observation carried out between HMI and a member of the senior leadership team showed close agreement on significant features of a lesson and arrived at the same judgments on the standards seen.

This indicates that the monitoring and evaluation of teaching carried out by the senior leadership team is accurate and thus provides a sound basis for further development of teaching and learning in science.
- During interviews with students it was clear that students were positive about the guidance they receive through target setting, monitoring and assessment. This was very high in the sixth form, strong in Key Stage 4, but less secure in Key Stage 3.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum provided is satisfactory and developing.

- The senior leadership has initiated a move towards a more creative curriculum. In science the response has been to develop a thematic approach to the Year 7 scheme of work. This is a strong model that is allowing good skills development that involves transferability to other areas of the curriculum. The department are going on to develop this in Years 8 and 9.
- The plan for an accelerated Key Stage 3 for the most able students is set to increase diversity of curriculum pathways and allow these students to start GCSE separate science courses earlier than previously.
- The range of courses in Key Stage 4 is well chosen to provide for the needs of all students. These include academic and vocational routes with courses in three separate sciences available to the higher attaining pupils. The department is clearly aware of the need in giving guidance on choosing courses to students well matched to their individual needs.
- A developing strength in science is the incorporation of how science works into all the schemes of work. The students say not only how much they enjoy and are motivated by practical work but also how it helps them to learn.
- One impact of the provision of three separate sciences in Key Stage 4 is the increased take up of science A levels. Currently these are limited to biology, chemistry and physics. There is no applied science route available to students at the school.

Leadership and management of science

Leadership and management of science are good.

- You and the senior leadership team have provided a positive environment in which science provision is being developed. You are monitoring progress in a number of ways not least through thorough data analysis.
- The leadership team in science, while not yet complete, is providing well for the department. They show a coherent approach to raising standards and have common beliefs about teaching and learning that are informed by the whole school strategy on such matters.

- They are managing the move to a more creative curriculum in science well. The students give positive accounts of how much of the science they do is relevant to their lives and interesting.
- Significant numbers of science staff are developed through middle management training. Other development needs are identified through review and training is organised internally and out of school. Staff show high levels of contentment with the training provided.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- securing a wider range curriculum pathways for all students aged 14-19
- improving the consistency of assessment practice and of the feedback given to students to help them improve
- raising the quality of teaching and learning to a consistent level including the management of students' behaviour.

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