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Ms T Jaffe
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Dear Ms Jaffe

Ofsted 2009–10 subject survey inspection programme: science in the sixth form

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 26 and 27 January 2010 to look at work in science in the sixth form.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on evaluating the impact of recent initiatives and investigating the need for future developments.

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.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included interviews with staff and learners, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of science is good.

Achievement in science

Achievement in science is good.

- Attainment in the sixth form is around the national average. However, considering the starting point of students in Year 12, they are making good progress.
- The school uses a range of measures to determine how well students are achieving. Detailed records of attainment and achievement are kept and analysed to inform planning.
- The recently introduced BTEC first diploma is providing a successful course for students, who are achieving at levels significantly above average.

- At AS and A2 level standards are rising. The A-level point scores show that there has been an improvement in standards from being significantly below average in 2006, to a situation where all three A-level sciences have been significantly above average during the last two years. Other sets of data used by the school confirm the picture of improvement over the last three years.
- There are no significant differences in achievement between different groups of students. In classroom observations it was evident that students of all abilities were given good access to the curriculum.
- Students show good attitudes to work and in many cases their behaviour is exemplary.

Quality of teaching in science

The quality of teaching in science is good.

- The majority of teaching seen was good and some was outstanding. Interviews with sixth form students showed that they have a highly positive view of the teaching they receive in science.
- The school has developed more specialist teaching as staffing has changed. It has good strategies for supporting those teachers who teach beyond their own specialism.
- Teachers use information and communication technology well to set out information and tasks clearly and to give students access to situations that they cannot experience first-hand. They use electronic whiteboards interactively with students.
- There is a common belief among the science teachers that students should be active participants in lessons and that practical investigation is key to students acquiring science skills and to effective learning in science.
- Teachers use question and answer techniques well to check students' understanding and progress. This also keeps students engaged in the work.
- Teachers overall keep up a good pace in teaching. They ensure that students engage in a range of activities that is well matched to their needs. Planning is detailed and ensures that the range of students' needs is addressed.
- Assessment of standards attained by students is thorough and is carried out and recorded systematically. There is some variation in the quality of marking, particularly in the quality and frequency of written comment and feedback to help students to improve.

Quality of the curriculum in science

The quality of the curriculum in science is good.

- Over recent years the curriculum in Key Stage 4 has been diversified to provide a good range of courses to meet the needs of students. This provides a good basis on which sixth form education can be built.

- Students can follow AS and A2 courses in biology, chemistry and physics. The school also provides a vocational pathway in BTEC First Diploma in science. Appropriate consideration is currently being given to a vocational course that would lead to qualifications equivalent to AS level GCE.
- Advice and guidance on choices of courses and careers is being reviewed. There were some examples of students in Year 9 not having understood fully the implications of choosing particular courses for their future learning. This was not the case for the majority of students interviewed.
- The school has introduced a successful transition project called 'Masterclass' that enables students to move from Key Stage 4 to the sixth form in a more secure way. This initiative is helpful, particularly to the 50% of students from other providers who join the sixth form.
- Good enrichment through well-contextualised science and the STEM club is contributing to students being recruited to science post-16.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in science

The effectiveness of the leadership and management in science is good

- The senior leadership team has created a positive environment for the development of the science provision. Whole-school issues for development have had a positive impact on the way the science department works and the standards achieved by students.
- The department shares expertise and works collaboratively on developing the curriculum. Lesson planning has a common and detailed format that supports good practice.
- The evaluation of performance is very well organised and thorough data analysis leads to rational intervention and planning.
- The systems in place allow the effective tracking of individual students and staff are able to compare the performance of different groups.
- Teachers feel well supported and also feel that they are free to contribute to the development of the science curriculum. Staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- promoting greater consistency in the assessment of students' work to provide them with guidance on how to improve
- ensuring that curriculum choices of students in Year 9 are consistently well-informed to include the range of courses available to them during the sixth form and beyond.

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 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