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Mrs H Sullivan-Tighe
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Sullivan-Tighe

Ofsted 2012-13 subject survey inspection programme: science

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 6 and 7 February 2013 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 without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of seven lessons

The overall effectiveness of science requires improvement.

Achievement in science

Achievement in science requires improvement.

- Standards in Key Stage 4 science have risen steadily over the last 5 years from very low levels. While outcomes in double science remain below the national average, the gap is closing. Current Year 11 students who were not performing well in their double science course, especially the course work element, were changed to an international GCSE course and this has helped to improve their progress.
- In Key Stage 3 overall achievement is also improving although performance in investigative skills is not tracked and assessed effectively. Achievement in Year 9 is also improving as students are taking a one year BTEC course as a preparation for studying science at Key Stage 4.
- In lessons where teaching is well planned to meet individual needs students show good attitudes to learning, especially in sessions that are

relevant to their interests and they enjoy a wide range of activities. In other lessons where students are not given sufficient opportunities to show and apply their knowledge they do not engage with their learning.

- A small range of science courses are available in the sixth form. Some students take a level 3 forensic science course, with others studying A Level biology. Information provided by the school indicates that outcomes for these courses are variable with achievement in BTEC courses usually better than in individual subject courses.

Quality of teaching in science

The quality of teaching in science requires improvement.

- Students interviewed were clear that they enjoy practical work and are certain that the amount of practical work they do in lessons is increasing. However they are not always given enough opportunities to develop their practical scientific skills through planning and carrying out scientific investigations for themselves and apply their own scientific knowledge and understanding.
- Where teachers have found out what students already know about a topic, they plan lessons that are relevant and engaging and meet the needs of students with different abilities. Teachers do not then assume everyone starts from the same point. They have a clear understanding of the next steps in learning required to develop individual students' understanding of scientific concepts as well as developing their practical skills.
- Students learn best in lessons that move at a fast pace and keep them focused on what they are learning. When the pace slows, usually because the teacher is talking too much, students become bored and drift off task.
- Teachers are increasingly using assessments that produce reliable performance data that is then used to track progress as well as inform planning for future lessons. Marking and feedback in students' books is varies in the quality of advice to students on how to improve their work.

Quality of the curriculum in science

The quality of the curriculum in science requires improvement.

- Curriculum planning is increasingly focused on ensuring students make better progress through developing courses that are tailored to their needs and promote progression across these key stages.
- Planning for assessment opportunities is improving as teachers understanding of the role assessment plays in their refining their lesson planning improves.
- Enrichment activities are well supported including Key Stage 3 STEM club, Key Stage 4 Saturday science school and weekly master classes. These have contributed towards enhancing students' progress.

Effectiveness of leadership in, and management of, science

The effectiveness of leadership in, and management of, science requires improvement.

- The new science leader has made a good start to improving the department. Systematic monitoring and evaluation is focused on raising achievement although the work of the department is affected by the impact of staff recruitment difficulties.
- Leadership is increasingly focused on seeking improvement through rigorous tracking and analysis of performance data to identify underachievement rapidly and make sure provision meets students' needs.
- Training for teachers has been difficult to organise due to a shortage of suitable local courses. There has been some input by examination boards to help develop new GCSE courses.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- making sure that lesson planning is focused more on what students are expected to learn, rather than just on what they are going to do
- making sure all students can access the learning activity by planning lessons that are targeted at a range of different abilities and individual learning needs
- including more opportunities for investigative skills.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop science in the school.

As explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. A copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Christine Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector