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Mr A Miller
Principal
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Dear Mr Miller

Ofsted 2010–11 survey inspection programme: numeracy – tackling the challenge of ensuring that young people and adults gain the numeracy skills they need for their careers and personal lives

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 23 and 24 September 2010 to look at your work in numeracy.

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 senior staff, tutors and learners; observation of four teaching and learning sessions in numeracy; and a review of the supporting documents that you provided.

Overall, Swindon College is good at tackling the challenge of ensuring that young people and adults gain the numeracy skills they need for their careers and personal lives.

Key findings

- The college has a whole-organisational approach to the development of learners' numeracy skills and it has improved the quality of the numeracy provision. Managers monitor the performance of each programme rigorously and success rates have improved, although they still have some way to go for GCSE mathematics.
- The specialist team of numeracy tutors ensures that numeracy is introduced in a context that is relevant to each learner. Vocational and Skills for Life teachers work well together to plan learners' development in numeracy. Similarly, designated functional skills specialists liaise closely with vocational staff in each subject area, to help ensure that they teach numeracy in a relevant vocational context.

- The college is fully committed to ensuring that staff develop the numeracy (and literacy) skills of all learners. Teaching observations evaluate learners' development of numeracy skills effectively. The annual performance review of all staff includes an appraisal of their role in developing learners' numeracy and literacy skills. The college has introduced the functional skills programmes particularly well. However, vocational staff teaching numeracy have insufficient opportunities to share good practice in the development of learners' numeracy skills.
- Numeracy teaching and learning sessions observed during the visit were good or better, with many outstanding features. Strengths of the numeracy teaching observed included: teachers' thorough preparation and well-planned lessons; the humorous, self-deprecating style of teaching that put learners at their ease and encouraged them to tackle the numeracy skills which many had struggled with in the past; the enjoyment and fun that teachers and learners generated in lessons; the support that learners gave to each other; and teachers' effective and regular assessment of learners' progress. The areas for improvement related to a small number of occasions where the learners did not receive sufficiently detailed explanations on how to carry out calculations and understand mathematical concepts.
- Learners value highly the additional support that they receive. The college has a strong additional learning support team that monitors learners' progress closely for signs of underperformance or being at risk of dropping out. Analysis of the results of these tests shows that a high proportion of learners have numeracy levels significantly below that of their main programme of study. However, the number of learners receiving additional support for numeracy is relatively low, indicating that some learners who would benefit from this additional support are not receiving it.
- The college has developed strong links with employers and staff have a clear understanding of the training needs of the local workforce, including their numeracy needs. The college's work-based provision includes effective teaching and learning in numeracy skills integrated into the broad range of training programmes provided to employers and unemployed learners.
- Achievement and standards are good. Success rates for numeracy qualifications show a general trend of improvement. In 2009/10, success rates for the adult certificate in numeracy were significantly above national averages. Success rates were good for learners aged 16 to 18 on further education courses who were taking a key skills qualification in application of number or the new qualification in functional mathematics. Success rates for GCSE in mathematics in A* to C grades improved steadily in 2009/10, which is comparable to the low national average.
- Apprentices achieve well, with good success rates in application of number courses. Although only a small number of learners on Train to Gain programmes took the certificate course in adult numeracy in 2008/09 and 2009/10, all were successful.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that learners working towards GCSE in mathematics receive the specific support they need to develop sufficient confidence, technical skills and understanding of mathematical concepts to reach the required standard
- reviewing procedures for identifying and meeting the need for additional learning support in numeracy, with a view to increasing further the number of learners benefiting from it
- increasing opportunities for vocational staff teaching numeracy to share good practice in the development of learners' numeracy skills.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop numeracy at Swindon College.

As I 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 will be sent to your local authority and the Skills Funding Agency.

Yours sincerely

Tony Noonan
Her Majesty's Inspector