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Mrs A Hutchinson
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Hutchinson

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 16 and 17 November 2010 to look at work in mathematics.

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; a scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of 11 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is good.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is good.

- Students' attainment by the end of Key Stage 4 is above average and improving. Students in all year groups are making good progress and many show enjoyment of their good achievement in mathematics. Each year over 25% of students go on to study A-level mathematics at local sixth-form colleges.
- Students show good levels of maturity and commitment to their learning. Their behaviour in lessons supports the good quality of learning evident in the department. The behaviour of a very small minority slows the progress in a few lessons.
- Students are not sufficiently critical of their understanding of mathematical concepts. Sometimes they are content to arrive at correct answers by successfully following a process which they do not fully understand. This

inhibits further improvements in progress and means that skills in using and applying mathematics are not developed strongly.

Quality of teaching of mathematics

The quality of teaching of mathematics is good.

- Teachers know their students well and establish an appropriately challenging and stimulating working atmosphere in lessons. Students appreciate the guidance they are given by staff, and the opportunities they have to seek extra help informally and in revision classes after school.
- Teachers' good subject knowledge enables them to offer explanations of mathematical concepts that are clear and accurate. Questioning strategies engage and motivate students. Lessons are structured around clear learning objectives and these are used well to steer explanations and discussions, and to select appropriate activities.
- Students are aware of their achievement targets and current level of attainment in each topic. Assessment is regular and it is used to inform learning strategies for groups and individuals. Marking is structured around end-of-unit feedback sheets and provides an accurate moderation of students' self-assessments and useful indications of the need to take action to improve knowledge and understanding of the content of the unit.
- The better teaching seen gave opportunities for structured group work. Students expressed the desire to have more of these opportunities to discuss ideas in mathematics, and develop and apply their learning in practical ways in lessons.
- Teachers rarely use information and communication technology (ICT) in lessons to explore mathematical ideas or give students chance to apply their skills. However, there is good use of electronic whiteboards in whole-class teaching and students are encouraged to make good use of the department's online support materials in homework and revision.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is satisfactory.

- The scheme of work at Key Stage 4 is based exclusively on the linear GCSE course, and it meets the needs of students adequately.
- More able students study GCSE statistics as an after-school option in Year 11, concurrently with the final year of their GCSE mathematics course. There are no enrichment opportunities for very able students to rise to the challenge of work beyond GCSE.
- A good range of extra provision for students who need support with their learning includes effective links with the learning support department and a number of after-school support and revision sessions. There are no mechanisms to manage the discontinuity to students' learning when they miss some mathematics lessons to attend these small group sessions.
- The Key Stage 3 scheme of work has been re-written recently and now outlines the mathematical content required to support students' good progress in each of the three tiers of ability.

- The emphasis on using and applying mathematics in the curriculum is insufficient. The department is aware of this and has already taken steps to address it and to ensure that the way in which investigative work is structured helps students to progress well in it.
- The department does not make any specific or additional responses in their teaching of mathematics with regards to the vocational work undertaken by some students at Key Stage 4. There are missed opportunities to use practical examples of mathematics drawn from students' work in these other subjects.

Effectiveness of leadership and management of mathematics

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of mathematics is good.

- The head of mathematics has brought about improvements in students' achievement over the last few years. He and his colleagues who have departmental responsibilities have appropriately high expectations of students and set themselves demanding targets. Morale in the department is good because this leadership inspires confidence and commitment.
- The work of the department is evaluated accurately and honestly but does not always focus with sufficient precision on the specific issues that will bring about further improvement in students' achievement.
- There is clear guidance given to staff on the most effective way to teach certain topics, and this improves the coherence of students' experience through each key stage and supports their progress. This guidance does not cover all key aspects of learning in all years.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- accelerating the development of using and applying mathematics, and using it as one of the vehicles through which students can enjoy challenging their own understanding of mathematical concepts
- developing a strategy to ensure better continuity and progression in mathematics for those students who benefit from the small group support work in Key Stage 3
- building in a wider range of learning opportunities, including more use of ICT and structured group work, to support better understanding and progress in lessons in all year groups.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop mathematics 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

Alan Taylor-Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector