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Miss L Hiscock
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Dear Miss Hiscock

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 24 and 25 January 2011 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; analyses of students' work; and observation of eight lessons including two joint observations with senior staff.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is good.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is good.

- Students arrive in the school with attainment in line with the national average and make good progress in Key Stages 3 and 4. Their attainment by the end of Key Stage 4 is above average.
- The proportion obtaining at least a grade C at GCSE is higher than that seen nationally whereas the percentage gaining the highest grades A or A* was similar to the national average in 2010. Nearly all also achieve a GCSE qualification in statistics, some by taking it a year earlier than usual.
- In lessons, many students show a good capacity to apply important mathematical techniques, and use existing knowledge and understanding

in new work confidently. They use mathematical language well when talking about problems and explaining their reasoning.

- Many students enjoy their work in mathematics. They are attentive in lessons and volunteer answers readily, but few probe deeply into aspects of the work, or question their own grasp of ideas thoroughly.
- Students' behaviour is good. They value the care and support of staff. This positive ethos strongly supports the good progress seen in all year groups.
- No formal mechanisms are in place to enable students to contribute their ideas and views about their learning in mathematics.

Quality of teaching in mathematics

The quality of teaching in mathematics is good.

- A very high proportion of the teaching is at least good with some outstanding practice. Staff have good subject knowledge and emphasise the development of understanding and making connections across topics.
- Learning is usually pacy and focused and students feel that the level of challenge is nearly always appropriate. However, sometimes opportunities are insufficient for students to move more quickly through work, or to tackle more challenging questions earlier.
- A strong sense of ambition for students' achievement translates into good levels of expectation in lessons.
- Teachers use the good-quality assessment information available to them to target provision appropriately and draw on a range of ways of gathering information in lessons about how well students are progressing at various points. However, no consistent method is in place to record students' achievement in using and applying mathematics, and to use this information to support their progress.
- Practical activities are underused in lessons. Information and communication technology is used well in data handling, but rarely in other topics. Students are encouraged to use computers outside of lessons to practice their skills.

Quality of the curriculum in mathematics

The quality of the curriculum in mathematics is good.

- The GCSE course meets students' needs well and enables all to achieve a qualification. Some interested and able students gain experience of mathematics beyond GCSE in Year 11. This is a developing area of the department's work and it is not currently part of timetabled provision. It does not necessarily lead to a qualification.
- Departmental meetings involve useful discussions about approaches to the teaching of certain topics, and the sharing of good resources and novel approaches. Schemes of work are detailed and useful but do not capture the outcomes of such discussions, and therefore help to establish them as departmental policy.

- Students have opportunities in some lessons to solve problems and think creatively, but few chances to undertake longer investigative work although such work is enjoyed by staff and students when it happens.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics

Leadership and management in mathematics are good.

- The head of department leads her subject with passion and vigour. She places a premium on students enjoying and feeling confident about their work and this strongly drives the work of the department.
- The department is managed very well with good systems to support the work of staff.
- The head of department and her line manager work together to focus on promoting improvement. Planning is based on accurately identified priorities and the quality of teaching and patterns in students' achievement are evaluated well. Actions are not always associated strongly with desired outcomes, however, and this can reduce the effectiveness of monitoring and self-evaluation.
- The school and its local community benefit from the status of mathematics as a specialist subject. Staff in the department contribute to developing teaching and learning strategies, and to good practice in the use of assessment, across the school. Effective links are established with other secondary and primary schools to support their work.
- The good capacity for further improvement is the result of the very good leadership, the evident clarity of purpose and the many strengths in the quality of the teaching in the department.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- establishing ways of involving students in all year groups in strategies to improve provision further
- encouraging students to play a more active part in lessons and to question their grasp of ideas and approaches to solutions more rigorously
- increasing opportunities for all students to use and apply mathematics, developing associated assessment systems, and linking work in this area more clearly with the rest of the mathematics curriculum
- implementing plans for some students to undertake work beyond GCSE that leads to a formal qualification.

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

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. Except in the case of academies, a copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Alan Taylor-Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector