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Mr P Birch
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Dear Mr Birch

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 6 and 7 March 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; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of five lessons with shorter visits to seven more.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is satisfactory.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is satisfactory.

- In recent years, GCSE results have been generally above average. For example, 72% gained GCSE grades A* to C in 2010 compared with a national average of 64%. The school's monitoring records indicate that broadly similar results are expected in 2011 for a cohort of students with weaker attainment on entry.
- Students make satisfactory progress relative to their starting points. For example, the proportion of students making the expected three levels of progress across Key Stages 3 and 4 is in line with national norms. Evidence collected during the inspection confirms that current students make satisfactory progress in lessons and over time.

- Middle ability boys make less progress than other groups, a difference that is not noticeable in the school's results as a whole. The difference between the progress of students entitled to a free school meal and other students is less than is the case nationally.
- Most students, particularly in Key Stage 4, have positive attitudes to their work. However, some students lack confidence in applying their knowledge to situations they have not come across before; as a result, they seek help too readily when faced with unfamiliar questions. Behaviour in lessons is good.

Quality of teaching in mathematics

The quality of teaching in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Teachers have good communication skills and explain mathematical ideas well. They establish good working relationships with students.
- Teachers do not always give sufficient emphasis to developing students' reasoning and oral and written communication skills. Some teaching focuses too much on how to perform mathematical techniques rather than understanding the underlying concepts or why the topic is being studied. As a result, some students depend on remembering methods and rules rather than drawing on their understanding.
- Students know the level or grade at which they are working and, with guidance, can identify topics where they need further work. Marking is satisfactory. Teachers could sharpen in-class assessment by being more systematic and checking the progress of all individuals in the group.
- Students value the support sessions available to them in Key Stage 4. A range of additional provision, including small-group lessons, extra lessons during the week and after-school revision classes, is effective in raising students' confidence and accelerating progress.

Quality of the curriculum in mathematics

The quality of the curriculum in mathematics is satisfactory.

- The curriculum caters appropriately for students' needs. All students study GCSE mathematics and, in recent years, almost all have left school with a GCSE pass at grade G or above. A small number take additional qualifications in Adult Literacy and Numeracy. The school provides those students studying for a diploma qualification with additional teaching in functional skills.
- The scheme of work covers the full range of the curriculum, including tasks that focus on developing students' skills in using and applying mathematics. However, recent changes mean that the impact of the current scheme of work is not fully realised. While the structure is in place, references to additional materials, such as links beyond the classroom or supporting resources including information and communication technology are not complete.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics

Leadership and management in mathematics are satisfactory.

- Self-evaluation is accurate. Senior leaders have identified improving results in mathematics as a key action point in the school's development plan. They have appropriate plans in place to support provision and clear success criteria by which they can measure improvement.
- Recent results at GCSE have fluctuated rather than improved steadily. However, intervention in Key Stage 4 is beginning to have an impact on the progress of the targeted students, and the school's current records suggest that more students are on track to achieve their targets than last year.
- The department has identified particular mathematical language that they aim to develop in the classroom. A broader agreement between teachers on common approaches to teaching particular topics has the potential to strengthen progression in students' learning.
- Managers' monitoring of the department is satisfactory but does not have sufficient rigour to monitor the full range of teachers' practice, such as detail about coverage of the curriculum and teaching approaches used.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising attainment by:
 - giving students more opportunities to explain their reasoning, orally and in writing
 - developing further students' ability to apply their learning in unfamiliar situations
- improving teaching by:
 - putting more emphasis on developing concepts and linking mathematical ideas
 - giving more emphasis to how mathematics is used beyond the classroom
 - reducing students' reliance on remembering rules
- following through the improvement plan and monitoring its implementation rigorously.

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

Paul Chambers
Her Majesty's Inspector