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Mr A Knowles
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Knowles

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 12 and 13 July 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 four lessons, with shorter visits to five other lessons.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is satisfactory.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Attainment is below average. This is illustrated by the 2010 GCSE results, when 50% of students gained a grade A* to C, compared with the national average of 64%. The school's records indicate that current students are likely to achieve GCSE results that exceed those in 2010.
- Students enter the school with attainment that is below and, in some years, well below average. They make good progress over their time in school: over the last three years, most groups of students, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, made better progress than similar students in other schools. In 2010, fewer of the more able students made the expected three levels of progress than was the case nationally.

- Students show a sound understanding of key mathematical concepts and skills. A small minority of students need regular support with their literacy skills to maintain their progress. Students are less strong in expressing mathematical arguments orally and in writing.
- Most students have positive attitudes; they contribute ideas readily and respond well to the tasks set.

Quality of teaching in mathematics

The quality of teaching in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Teachers' enthusiasm and strong subject knowledge enable them to set clear learning objectives and raise students' aspirations. Teachers use praise well to promote a positive atmosphere in lessons; they select activities that engage students and that give them a chance to discuss their ideas informally. Teachers plan work that is appropriate for the large majority of students but not all work provides a consistent challenge for the full range of abilities within the class.
- Teachers justify mathematical results and most teaching has an appropriate focus on developing conceptual understanding. However, some teaching has too much focus on students solely applying techniques.
- Teachers make satisfactory use of a range of assessment methods. Students are beginning to take more responsibility for monitoring their own learning. Marking gives students an indication of how well they are doing and, in the best examples, includes advice about how to improve.

Quality of the curriculum in mathematics

The quality of the curriculum in mathematics is satisfactory.

- The curriculum caters for the needs of the students. Most students enter GCSE mathematics and, in 2010, all who entered passed at grades A* to G. A flexible approach to examination entries has helped to serve the interests of individual students. Middle-ability students have the opportunity to take the Adult Literacy and Numeracy tests. Students following a diploma route in Key Stage 4 benefit from extra lessons to support the development of their functional skills.
- The scheme of work gives adequate coverage of the National Curriculum. Leaders and managers are aware of the need to incorporate a series of rich tasks that focus on improving students' problem-solving and investigative skills and have appropriate plans to do so.
- Additional support for students outside lessons, such as one-to-one tuition and revision classes, has had a positive impact on students' progress. Students appreciate the availability of staff for providing additional, informal, help outside the normal school day. Some students also benefit from extra mathematics lessons towards the end of Year 11.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics

The effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics is good.

- Over the last three years, the proportion of students gaining GCSE A* to C grades has risen substantially from 26% to 50%. Improvements in 2010 were more modest than the previous two years and were broadly in line with improvements nationally.
- Evidence of some underachievement by the most able students in 2010 led to a change of policy regarding GCSE entries. Current school records suggest that, as a result of this and other well-focused interventions, more students are likely to achieve the highest A* and A grades in 2011.
- Leaders and managers give high priority to ensuring that provision in mathematics is well resourced. In addition, the targeted use of financial resources enabled over 50 students to benefit from one-to-one tuition in the current year, including students in each year group.
- Generally accurate self-evaluation, including the evaluation of teaching and learning, is leading to appropriate targets for improvement. The school's records show that improved outcomes are being maintained through a time of considerable changes to staffing. These have, however, slowed recent developments to the curriculum.
- The department has appropriate plans to develop greater consistency in the approaches used by different teachers by providing more guidance on using information and communication technology in lessons.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising attainment further by ensuring that teaching:
 - focuses consistently on developing conceptual understanding and not just techniques
 - provides an appropriate level of challenge for all students in the class
- strengthening the scheme of work by:
 - including activities that focus on developing students' problem-solving and investigative skills
 - offering additional guidance on teaching approaches that address misconceptions and build understanding.

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