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Mr J Wilson
Acting Headteacher
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Dear Mr Wilson

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 17 and 18 October 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 11 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is satisfactory.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is good.

- After a number of years of broadly average attainment, GCSE mathematics results improved considerably in 2011 and attainment is now above average. The year group concerned had average attainment on entry, so this represents good progress over time. Examination results for the current Year 11 in the first units of their GCSE show further improvement, suggesting that they are also making good progress.
- The progress of students in other year groups is uneven. While progress is good in Key Stage 4, the school's own assessment data indicate that progress is satisfactory during Key Stage 3. Students are increasingly given opportunities to use and apply mathematics, for example to tackle unfamiliar problems, but they are not always confident in doing so.

- Learning and progress were satisfactory in the lessons observed. Students responded positively to well-structured lessons that include opportunities for independent work in groups or individually and for discussion of ideas. However, they became restless where the teacher dominated the lesson and did most of the talking.
- Most students are not learning to present their work in an acceptable way because, with a few exceptions, their class workbooks are not marked well enough. Issues like poor presentation, invalid use of symbols, and lack of coherent working are not commented upon. While such sloppy presentation does not prevent students getting good examination marks, it does mean that they are not prepared well for their next stage in education or the world of work.

Quality of teaching in mathematics

The quality of teaching in mathematics is satisfactory.

- As the school recognises, the teaching observed was not good enough to explain the recent improvements in results. This was partly because some teachers tried potentially fruitful teaching approaches that were relatively unfamiliar to students. In these atypical lessons, students did not respond as expected and their teachers did not adapt their chosen approaches quickly enough, resulting in too much ill-focused discussion, often dominated by teacher talk.
- An engaging activity was seen in three separate lessons, where students played a version of noughts and crosses where the aim was to avoid a line. While this generated some interesting discussions on game strategy and whether the game was fair, it did not link to the learning objectives, which concerned probability.
- The use of assessment to support learning in lessons is variable. In the best lessons, teachers created early opportunities for the students to work independently, so they were doing mathematics rather than talking about it. As they worked, the teachers and teaching assistants moved around the class to make sure that all were making progress and to offer support or further challenge as appropriate.
- It is clear from students' books that students usually tackle some independent work each lesson. However, the depth and coherence of the work covered is too variable. There are also inconsistencies in the quality and regularity of marking, the setting of homework and the use of information and communication technology as a learning aid.

Quality of the curriculum in mathematics

The quality of the curriculum in mathematics is satisfactory.

- The schemes of work specify the expected order of topics, the time allowed for each unit of work and the main learning objectives. The Key Stage 3 schemes include hyperlinks giving more detail but, unfortunately, the links are not currently working.

- While the schemes of work are sufficient for experienced teachers to plan their lessons appropriately, they give little guidance on preferred teaching strategies, the expected depth of coverage or the level of work expected for different sets. As a result, students are not guaranteed a coherent learning experience as they move through the school.
- As befits a mathematics and computing specialist school, the department has been involved in curriculum development by taking part in a pilot dual-award GCSE. Now the pilot has ended, the school is following a new dual-award GCSE course which continues to allow students to achieve well.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics

The effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Despite the shortcomings of the schemes of work and the inconsistencies of teaching, the school has successfully raised attainment and improved progress in mathematics, demonstrating its capacity for improvement.
- Monitoring and evaluation include regular lesson observation with feedback to teachers. This is mainly undertaken by the line manager rather than the head of department due to timetable constraints.
- Regular line-management meetings are scheduled where the head of mathematics reports on a range of issues, including implementation of the departmental action plan and students' progress against targets. However, they do not lead to clear action points. For example, work scrutiny undertaken last year highlighted the inconsistencies in marking and homework, but these issues have not yet been addressed.
- Senior leaders continually focus on improving the quality of teaching. Within the mathematics department, teachers value the opportunities they have to discuss teaching ideas with colleagues. However, this informal professional development is not systematic and there is no mechanism to capture good practice to provide guidance for other teachers.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- maintaining and improving recent levels of attainment and progress by:
 - improving the presentation of students' work
 - improving the consistency of teaching and assessment
 - incorporating guidance in the schemes of work on progression, teaching approaches and the expectations for different sets
- increasing the impact of leadership and management by:
 - pursuing consistency with greater determination, for example by ensuring that line-management meetings lead to clear action points
 - formalising discussions among teachers so that they produce guidance that can be incorporated in the schemes of work

- finding ways for the head of department to observe more lessons.

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

Stephen Abbott
Her Majesty's Inspector