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Mr S Holdup
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Holdup

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 2 and 3 November 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 and shorter visits to a further eight lessons. Two lessons were observed jointly with members of staff from the school.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is good.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is good.

- Attainment in Key Stages 3 and 4 is above average and is improving. Unvalidated data for 2011 indicates that 78% of students gained an A* to C grade in GCSE mathematics compared with the national average of 65%. Outcomes in the sixth form are in line with that seen nationally across a range of level 3 courses.
- Students enter the school with attainment in mathematics that is broadly average, although recent cohorts have had fewer low-attaining students on entry to the school than is the case nationally. Progress measures indicate that students make better gains in their learning than similar students in other schools. For example, in 2011, the proportion of students making at least the expected three levels of progress was above average

and was an improvement on the 2010 figure, particularly for those students who entered the school at level 3 or below in mathematics.

- Current students say they enjoy their lessons. They make good progress. They behave well, show positive attitudes to their work and are keen to improve. They support each other very effectively and enjoy working in pairs and groups. Older students are less confident in tackling open-ended or multi-step problems and sometimes rely too much on the teacher for support and guidance.
- The achievement of different groups of students is similar across all key stages. The progress made by students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is in line with that of their peers.

Quality of teaching in mathematics

The quality of teaching in mathematics is good.

- Most teaching has an appropriate focus on developing students' conceptual understanding in mathematics. Students in all key stages say that most teaching ensures that they understand principles and concepts rather than simply providing rules and algorithms for them to follow. However, the extent to which teaching is consistently effective in this regard is variable.
- In the best lessons, teachers use information and communication technology well to enhance learning. Teachers' questioning ensures that all students are fully involved in the lesson, requires them to reason and justify their thinking, and to use mathematical terminology accurately. Teachers make increasingly effective use of a range of problem-solving tasks designed to promote discussion in pairs and small groups.
- Where teaching is less effective, teachers talk for too long or do too much thinking for students. As a result, the pace of learning slows and lessons lack challenge for all students, particularly the most able. Teachers' lesson planning does not always identify clearly how tasks will be adapted and extended to provide greater challenge for more-able students.

Quality of the curriculum in mathematics

The quality of the curriculum in mathematics is satisfactory.

- The curriculum generally meets the needs of all groups of students and contributes effectively to their good achievement. All students study GCSE mathematics and a small number who are following diploma programmes are supported to obtain Functional Skills qualifications. In the sixth form, students follow a range of courses, including the International Baccalaureate. A variety of intervention strategies, particularly in Key Stage 4, contributes significantly to improved outcomes.
- Schemes of work provide useful guidance to teachers on resources to promote discussion and conceptual understanding. The teaching programme provides adequate coverage of the National Curriculum, although guidance for teachers to ensure progression in problem solving

and the use of investigative approaches is much more limited. As a result, the development of students' skills in using and applying mathematics is less effective than in other areas of the curriculum.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics

The effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics is good.

- The mathematics department is a cohesive team of staff who support each other very well. They share a strong commitment to further raising achievement and give generously of their time to support individuals and groups of students to succeed. The subject leaders drive improvements well and effective systems enable the sharing of good practice, including through departmental meetings.
- Target setting is appropriately challenging and the monitoring of students' progress is detailed and accurate. Assessment information is used highly effectively to target students for support and intervention. Line-management meetings with senior managers ensure that subject leaders are held regularly to account for students' progress.
- Self-evaluation is thorough but a few judgements are over-generous because performance is not benchmarked sufficiently rigorously against national standards. A range of monitoring activities takes place throughout the year, in line with the school's systems. However, greater rigour is needed in the monitoring of teaching to improve more rapidly the less effective teaching in the department.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that all teaching is consistently effective in promoting understanding and in challenging all students, particularly the most able
- refining schemes of work to ensure clear progression in the development and monitoring of students' skills in using and applying mathematics
- increasing the rigor with which leaders and managers monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of teaching to improve more rapidly the less effective teaching in the department.

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.

Yours sincerely

Lee Northern
Her Majesty's Inspector