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Ms T White
Headteacher
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Dear Ms White

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 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is good.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is good.

- Students attain highly at Key Stages 3 and 4. At GCSE, three quarters are awarded A* to C grades and one third attain A* or A grades.
- In the last three years, the percentages of students who have made the expected three levels of progress between Key Stages 2 and 4 have been above average. The school's 2011 data show that an above average proportion of students at each level of prior attainment made four levels of progress. Current data indicate continued strong progress.
- The school's analyses show that boys and girls make above expected progress but the progress of students known to be eligible for free school meals or who receive support at school action plus is not as strong.

- Records show that a high proportion of students make the expected two levels of progress during Key Stage 3, although the school has correctly identified that some with higher prior attainment could have done better and has recently put measures in place to bring this about.
- At A level, progress varies, dipping to broadly average in 2011. The school's data show that current students are on track to do better, although some are below target in statistics. Students make above average progress at AS, and expected progress in further mathematics.
- Students work hard and behave well in lessons. They develop skills well, but rely more on following methods they have been taught than on thinking things through for themselves, taking initiative, or understanding the reasons the method works.

Quality of teaching in mathematics

The quality of teaching in mathematics is good.

- Teachers build good relationships with students and provide much support within and outside lessons to help them if they are stuck or to stretch higher attainers. They explain methods in detail and set out the steps clearly for students to follow, so they learn these effectively.
- Teachers use a range of activities and equipment that motivates and engages students, and helps to build their confidence, although some opportunities are missed to deepen students' thinking and reasoning.
- Teaching quality varies widely, with some that is outstanding, much that is good, but occasions when it is inadequate. In the best lessons, teachers ensure that students understand the concepts underlying the methods, overcome misconceptions and develop independence. Such approaches are not consistent. In most lessons, teachers use their very good knowledge about each student to match work to their differing needs, then monitor their progress closely and adapt their teaching accordingly.
- Students are given opportunities to reflect on their work, particularly tests, and identify areas of weakness. Individual work on computers and support from teachers helps them to improve, but sometimes does not enable them to overcome misconceptions.

Quality of the curriculum in mathematics

The quality of the curriculum in mathematics is good.

- The curriculum, intervention and entry policies are constantly reviewed and adapted to meet students' needs. All students take GCSE early and can then improve their grades at a re-sit or move on to higher courses. A large number choose to study mathematics in the sixth form. The well-focused intervention and revision sessions contribute effectively to students' strong progress across year groups. For example, sixth-form students help low attaining Year 7 students with number work through structured practical activities that they enjoy.

- Schemes of work give outline guidance to teachers on the topics to be taught and links to a main textbook and other resources including problem solving, functional skills activities and investigations. They do not include guidance on using conceptual introductions that deepen students' understanding or stipulate breadth in a topic, so some students miss out on these. All students have opportunities to solve problems, but there is not a structured development of skills in using and applying mathematics.
- Teachers use information and communication technology (ICT) to clarify their explanations. Students use an individualised package for homework and extra practice on areas they find difficult but they have little opportunity for hands-on use of ICT as a class to deepen their understanding across the mathematics curriculum.
- Extra-curricular opportunities increase students' enjoyment of mathematics. They include competitions for students in Years 7 and 8 organised by sixth-form students, mathematics challenges, and projects with partner primary schools as part of the specialist provision.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics

The effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics is good.

- The head of department has focused on appropriate priorities and developed a strong and effective team spirit that has underpinned the substantial improvements in teaching and students' progress in recent years. The range of activities, teaching styles and assessment approaches during lessons has increased through discussion, modelling and sharing, although the consistency of their use is not monitored systematically to ensure every student's entitlement to them.
- Monitoring of teaching, particularly where it was weaker, and working closely with colleagues has led to demonstrable improvement, but some weak teaching remains. Timetabling constraints have limited opportunities for monitoring and support by subject experts, which are vital for increasing the emphasis on students' understanding needed to raise all teaching to good or better. Records of lesson observations rarely indicate how the progress of individuals or groups of students contributes to judgements and sometimes do not include a sufficiently specific area for development to focus improvement and support. Joint observation by senior and subject leaders during the visit was accurate.
- Meticulous monitoring of students' progress and careful analysis of outcomes for individuals and groups inform well a range of interventions and the development plan. Nevertheless, the plan misses opportunities to specify improvements in teaching and assessment so that all staff may see how they can contribute to this.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- focusing teaching more on the development of understanding, the use of thinking and reasoning, and increasing students' independence

- enhancing schemes of work to provide guidance on using conceptual approaches, ensure breadth and completeness in topics and develop systematically across the mathematics curriculum the skills of using and applying mathematics
- increasing the impact of monitoring on the quality of teaching by focusing observation of teaching more on to students' progress and understanding, and specifying, supporting and following up more closely areas for development in annual plans and for individuals.

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

Gill Close
Her Majesty's Inspector