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Mr J Waxman
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Dear Mr Waxman

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 7 and 8 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.

- Attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 is high.
- Progress between Key Stages 2 and 4 is strong for students with all levels of prior attainment. The proportions making the expected three levels of progress and making four levels of progress are above average.
- Students known to be eligible for free school meals make above average progress. In contrast, students with Black Caribbean or White British heritage, and those who receive support at 'school action plus' or have a statement of special educational needs make broadly average progress.
- The school's records show that students make strong progress during Key Stage 3 and reach above average standards, although only average percentages attain the highest two levels.

- In the sixth form, students make good progress at A level, and satisfactory progress at AS level and in further mathematics.
- Students work conscientiously in lessons, although a few are slow to get started. They develop skills and knowledge effectively, but their understanding and independence are not as strong. For example, they do not automatically seek to convince themselves whether a particular method is appropriate or check their answers by a different route.

Quality of teaching in mathematics

The quality of teaching in mathematics is good.

- Teachers know students' strengths and weaknesses, and provide effective help if students are stuck. They use their good subject knowledge and enthusiasm to explain methods clearly and encourage correct forms of expression, so students use techniques systematically and accurately.
- The quality of teaching varies, generally between good and satisfactory. Many students are regularly helped to develop their reasoning skills, to overcome misconceptions, and to understand concepts and why methods work. But others experience this only at times; they are mainly taught methods and spend time on too many similar questions without meeting the full range and depth of a topic.
- Teachers use a variety of techniques to assess students' progress during lessons, for example through mini-whiteboards or post-it notes. They generally match questions well to students' needs and act on the responses effectively to adapt subsequent teaching. Students assess some of their own performance, particularly in tests, but are not always clear about what would constitute evidence for achieving lesson objectives that are pertinent to them.

Quality of the curriculum in mathematics

The quality of the curriculum in mathematics is good.

- Topics in the scheme of work are sequenced carefully to avoid repetition and support the rapid progress through to GCSE, with most students taking the higher tier and top sets being entered early. This leads to high take-up for A level, where a good range of options including further mathematics is studied.
- Schemes of work include investigatory activities but do not provide guidance on conceptual approaches, on how students might make links between topics or on the structured development of using and applying mathematics across the curriculum. Students do not have consistent opportunities to learn concepts by using information and communication technology (ICT) through demonstration or hands-on exploration.
- Provision is evaluated and adapted to meet needs. Careful monitoring of performance informs intervention for individuals in each year group. Personalised learning weeks provide time for each student to focus on areas for improvement. Revision and additional support outside school

hours are well attended. Higher-attaining students enter for mathematics challenges and members of the sixth form help younger students.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics

The effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics is good.

- Leaders have brought about notable improvements in recent years in students' achievement and the quality of teaching and assessment, particularly where there were inadequacies. They have ensured high expectations of students and support for them, and nurtured an enthusiastic team that is open to sharing and improving practice.
- Monitoring of teaching and regular meetings in cross-subject groups have brought about improvements, although records of lesson observations do not evaluate students' progress in detail or identify sharply focused areas for improvement of teaching to which future support and monitoring can be linked. Monitoring of students' books has contributed to teachers giving clearer guidance for students on how to improve their work, but missed some opportunities to check consistency of approaches to provision. Joint observation by senior and subject leaders during the visit was accurate.
- Detailed evaluation of performance, provision and students' views has identified areas for improvement accurately and led to many appropriate planned actions. There is room for sharper analysis in relation to national figures and topic areas, and more tightly focused priorities with success criteria based on impact that convey how all staff can contribute to them.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- concentrating teaching more on developing students' understanding, reasoning, independence and reflection on the depth of their learning
- providing guidance in schemes of work on conceptual approaches, including through using ICT, links between topics, and the structured development of using and applying mathematics across the curriculum
- focusing monitoring of teaching and evaluation more sharply on students' progress and understanding to identify priorities and ensure improvement.

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