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Mr P Cook
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Cook

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 16 and 17 January 2012 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; observation of five lessons and short visits to a further five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is satisfactory.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Students' performance at the end of Key Stage 4 has improved rapidly, rising from significantly below average in 2009 to just above average in 2011. The proportion of students obtaining GCSE A* to C grades in 2011 was high but the proportion achieving A* or A grades was below average.
- Students are making much better progress than three years ago, with the strongest improvement lower down the school. Value-added data show that students completing Key Stage 4 in 2011 made better progress than the year before but less progress than students nationally. Data are used well to monitor the progress of different groups of students and gaps are closing. For example, boys' performance at GCSE was much improved in 2011 when they out-performed the girls. Sixth-form students generally make the progress expected based on their GCSE results.

- Students make good or better progress in most lessons. They are encouraged to develop investigative skills and learn to tackle problems methodically and confidently. They contribute well to class discussions and take pride in their work. Progress is slower and less secure in the lessons where teaching is weaker.
- Behaviour in most lessons is good. Students are attentive, enjoy their learning and show very positive attitudes. Many have the maturity to self-assess their learning, to decide for themselves which techniques they need to practise and how well they understand concepts.

Quality of teaching in mathematics

The quality of teaching in mathematics is satisfactory.

- The quality of teaching varies. While some experienced staff teach consistently good or outstanding lessons and other teachers, who are relatively new to the profession show the potential to be outstanding, some weak teaching hampers the learning of those students affected.
- In the best lessons, teachers plan interesting activities that challenge and stimulate the students. They use expert questioning techniques that extend thinking, unpick misconceptions and check learning. Teachers respond well to students' needs by slowing or quickening the pace and re-emphasising key points where necessary.
- In the weaker lessons, learning materials are dull and tasks are repetitive. Each student works their way through every exercise regardless of ability. The pace is pedestrian and in some cases ineffective behaviour management results in students being distracted from learning.
- All the teachers give good individual support to students as they circulate around the classroom. Teaching assistants also work effectively alongside teachers to give valuable support.
- Marking is generally good with pockets of outstanding practice but also a few examples of infrequent and cursory marking.

Quality of the curriculum in mathematics

The quality of the curriculum in mathematics is good.

- The curriculum has been designed well to meet the needs of students. Investigations are used well in Key Stage 3 to develop students' research and problem-solving skills through a series of 'rich tasks'. The choice between modular or linear examinations and entry patterns are made each year to meet the needs of students. Free Standing Mathematics Qualifications are offered in Year 11 to prepare students for A-level study and to challenge the most able.
- Teachers are strongly encouraged to develop students' understanding of mathematics and its underlying concepts rather than merely teaching 'recipes' to pass examinations. Their ready availability at lunchtimes enables a wide range of students to seek help or get on with work.

Students appreciate the chance to get help from their own or another teacher outside lessons.

- Interventions are carefully planned and data are used increasingly well to intervene early. Extra revision sessions are provided before examinations and the early-morning sessions are particularly well attended.
- Good enrichment opportunities include competitions in which students have enjoyed success. The mathematics trip to Paris provided an excellent opportunity for students to learn in new and exciting settings. Students on the GCSE C/D borderline benefit from a residential visit that mixes mathematics with outdoor pursuits.
- Sixth-form students volunteer, and are trained, to help Year 8 students with mathematics. The team has good links with primary schools and provides sessions for them that culminate in a Maths Challenge Day.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics

The effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics is good.

- A relentless drive to be better has resulted in considerable improvements over the last few years. Senior leaders and the head of mathematics have an excellent grasp of the strengths and weaknesses of the department. They know what needs to be done next and have prioritised areas for improvement very well.
- Opportunities for professional development are good. Teachers are encouraged to attend external training events and to pass on new ideas to the team. Sharing of best practice is effective and good support is given to new and underperforming teachers.
- Data monitoring is very thorough and good use is made of the extensive range of reports that is available. Sharper target setting has been a major factor in improving attainment. More challenging targets are now needed, across the ability range, to raise achievement further.
- Teachers are deployed effectively, making the best possible use of the strengths within the departmental team. Strategies to encourage aspiring managers are well thought out and progression planning is good.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- increasing the amount of good or better teaching
- making individual students' targets more challenging.

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

Jan Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector