Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

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Dr S Jones
Headteacher
Chase Terrace Technology College
Bridge Cross Road
Chase Terrace
Burntwood
WS7 2DB

Dear Dr Jones

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 26 and 27 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; and observation of four lessons, together with shorter visits to 10 other lessons.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is satisfactory.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Attainment is broadly average. For example, in 2010, 66% of students gained a GCSE grade A* to C, compared with the national average of 64%. GCSE results in 2011 were below average. Convincing evidence provided by the school shows that current students are in line to attain results in 2012 that will not only return to 2010 levels, but surpass them.
- Students, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities make satisfactory progress in lessons and over time. In 2011, too few of the higher-ability students made the expected three National Curriculum levels of progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. Girls, and in particular higher-ability girls, made less progress than boys. The school's

data indicate that boys and girls currently in Year 11 are making similar progress.

- In the sixth form, students' achievement is satisfactory. Although attainment is below average, students make progress that is in line with similar students in other schools.
- In lessons, students offer ideas readily; they behave well and most are keen to complete the work set. They respond willingly to tasks where the demands are consistent and/or routine; they lack confidence when questions are presented in an unfamiliar way.

Quality of teaching in mathematics

The quality of teaching in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Teachers establish good working relationships in the classroom and offer effective individual help to students who are in need of additional support. They make useful links with students' prior learning and, where possible, with other areas of mathematics.
- Some teaching has too much emphasis on ensuring that students can apply processes, rather than promoting understanding of the underlying concepts. As a result, students lack confidence when faced with situations where they cannot apply a rule, or are uncertain which rule to apply.
- Teachers ensure that students have a clear idea of how well they are doing in class and over time. Students understand their targets and the level they are working at. Most teaching encourages students to reflect on their learning and consolidate regularly.
- Some teaching offers a diet of questions that consolidate learning, rather than extending it and, on occasion, teaching does not ensure sufficient challenge to the most able students.

Quality of the curriculum in mathematics

The quality of the curriculum in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Almost all students enter for GCSE mathematics and, in 2011, all those who entered gained a pass at grade A* to G. The small number of students for whom GCSE is not appropriate follow an alternative pathway with a view to gaining entry-level qualifications. The most able students in Year 11 study for a Free Standing Mathematics Qualification that takes their understanding beyond GCSE.
- Numbers opting to continue their studies of mathematics in the sixth form are growing. The sixth-form curriculum includes an opportunity to study further mathematics.
- The schemes of work for Key Stages 3 and 4 and for the sixth form cover all requirements. At Key Stage 3, the scheme is based around levelled objectives and more detailed learning outcomes. Schemes offer electronic links to additional ideas and teaching materials, including some that focus on developing students' skills in using and applying mathematics.

- Students say that staff are approachable and available to offer support when needed. Year 11 students value the additional lessons, including some one-to-one tuition, which help them to focus on areas of difficulty.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics

The effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics is satisfactory.

- After an improving trend of GCSE results to 2010, results dropped in 2011. Mathematics has high priority in the school's improvement plan. Signs are that the programme of additional support, sharper monitoring and a close match of course to individual student is having a positive impact on the progress of current students. Trends of improvement are evident in the sixth form and in teacher assessments at Key Stage 3.
- Self-evaluation is broadly accurate. Leaders and managers identify accurately the strengths and weaknesses of teaching in the department. Improvement planning has a clear focus on raising attainment.
- The range of teaching approaches across the department is wider than in most schools. Teachers could strengthen progression through agreeing which methods are most effective in securing long-term learning, and eliminating those that provide students with techniques without contributing to building understanding.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving achievement to ensure that all groups of students consistently make at least the expected progress between Key Stages 2 and 4
- raising the attainment of the most able students through ensuring that they meet sufficient challenge in lessons
- strengthening progression through:
  - agreeing common approaches that lead to effective long-term learning
  - increasing the proportion of teaching that focuses on building conceptual understanding.

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

Paul Chambers
Her Majesty's Inspector