

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

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



5 March 2012

Mrs G Wilson
Headteacher
Great Marlow School
Bobmore Lane
Marlow
Buckinghamshire
SL7 1JE

Dear Mrs Wilson

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: English and mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit with Gill Close HMI on 25 and 26 January 2012, to look at work in English and 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 parts of 11 lessons in English and 12 lessons in mathematics.

The overall effectiveness of English is good.

Achievement in English

Achievement in English is good.

- Students' attainment at GCSE rose to above average in 2011 and the school's data indicate similar standards at present for current students in Year 11.
- Most students make good progress in English. In 2011, the department identified the underachievement of more able students and the fact that disabled students and those with special educational needs without a statement made satisfactory, rather than good, progress. Boys did not achieve as well as girls in English. These students are being supported appropriately and are now progressing as well as their peers in most lessons.

- Students make particularly good progress in reading, speaking and listening. Progress in extended writing is a whole-school priority and evidence shows that this skill is improving.
- The introduction of an investigational approach to texts and increased use of media and information and communication technology are improving the engagement of boys in most English lessons. Students say that they enjoy learning from each other in group discussion and role play. A few boys find it difficult to write about texts when they are not supported by practical tasks. They say that lessons can be repetitive when they involve only writing in this way.
- Standards of attainment in AS- and A-level courses are broadly average and students make satisfactory progress overall. Students draw on their wide range of reading to compare texts independently and they discuss the books with great enthusiasm.

Quality of teaching in English

The quality of teaching in English is good.

- The characteristic strengths of teaching include positive relationships, structured lesson plans, clear expectations, and a variety of activities. Teachers make effective use of teaching assistants and available resources, such as projectors and laptop computers.
- Most teachers make good use of challenging targets and their assessments to match lessons to the range of students' abilities. Students know their target levels and grades and most know what to do specifically to improve their work, although the quality of teachers' marking is inconsistent. In a small minority of lessons, including in the sixth form, teachers make insufficient use of students' targets to inform tasks and probing questions to challenge and extend the understanding of more able students.
- The quality of teaching in the sixth form lessons observed varied from satisfactory to outstanding. The outstanding lesson was tailored to meet the individual needs of each student to ensure that all made rapid progress. Detailed individual feedback helped students to improve their work. Students supported each other's learning very well and demonstrated a good level of analytical skills.

Quality of the curriculum in English

The quality of the curriculum in English is good.

- The curriculum is broad and balanced. A special feature is an innovative accelerated reading programme that motivates students to read widely from the time they enter the school. Students discuss favourite authors and books enthusiastically. The curriculum includes an integrated programme for lower ability students in Year 7, a two-year Key Stage 3 course for middle and higher ability students, and early entry to GCSE for more able students. This meets students' different needs well. In addition

there is a range of intervention programmes, booster lessons and revision classes.

- Schemes of work for English have been reviewed appropriately to promote progression in skills, including in writing, within and across key stages. Students are well prepared for the transition into GCSE and A-level courses.
- Enrichment activities include theatre visits, a visiting author and a national poetry competition.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in English

The effectiveness of leadership and management in English is good.

- The new head of department has developed a shared vision of improvement through clear expectations of teaching and learning.
- Subject development planning provides clear direction for improving relevant priorities. The priorities are informed by accurate self-evaluation that includes monitoring and evaluation of students' progress data, lesson observations, teachers' planning and students' work.
- The English team works very effectively together, sharing good practice and lesson planning.
- Systems, including for monitoring the progress of individuals and groups of students towards challenging targets, are established well to promote continuing improvement. The school's progress tracking system provides target levels and grades for the end of key stages. It does not identify targets for the end of each year to support teachers' planning. Nonetheless, given the systems in place, and the track record of improvement, the capacity for further improvement is good.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- providing annual as well as key stage targets and ensuring that teachers use them consistently to challenge all students, particularly more able students
- ensuring that teachers' marking consistently informs students how to improve their work.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is satisfactory.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is good.

- Students' attainment at GCSE in 2011 rose to significantly above average overall and for those achieving grades A* to C. In recent years, students have made significantly above average progress between Key Stages 2 and 4. The only exceptions to this in 2011 were the average progress made by girls with low prior attainment and by students known to be eligible for free school meals even though they made better progress than

similar students nationally. Records and students' work show that current students are on track for above average progress.

- Students also make above average progress during Key Stage 3, by the end of which they attain above average standards.
- In the sixth form, students make satisfactory progress at A level in mathematics and statistics, building on a relatively strong start in Year 12. While many students are working at their target grade, some are not producing the quality of work expected, given their GCSE attainment.
- The strong encouragement and support from teachers helps students to develop study skills and revise effectively. However, students do not build the conceptual understanding to help them remember their mathematics, or the independent problem-solving skills to help them use it in a range of contexts. Some describe how they forget it very quickly. This indicates that there is room for a further rise in achievement.

Quality of teaching in mathematics

The quality of teaching in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Teachers provide a caring and supportive environment, offering many revision sessions and helping students when they are stuck. They convey high expectations of attainment and manage behaviour well so that time is used productively and students work hard.
- Teachers use their good subject knowledge to give clear explanations and demonstrate methods, which students follow carefully to produce correct answers, but they give students too few opportunities to think hard to solve problems for which they have not seen a worked example. Students do not have enough time to think for themselves as teachers often spend too long on explanations, or give answers too soon or when not needed.
- In some lessons, teachers use practical activities or visual illustrations that help students understand a concept or method, but this is not the norm. Links between such introductions and more abstract methods are not always made well enough. In some classes, students have little opportunity for group work or discussion to help them understand the work they do. Sometimes, students are encouraged to develop independence through checking their work by estimation or using inverse operations but, too often, students wait to be told the correct answer.
- Activities in lessons do not always meet students' needs or challenge them; in a few classes everyone does the same work. Teachers do not monitor students' understanding well through the use of mini-whiteboards or by making sure that they see everyone's work. Some desks are too close together for teachers to reach all students to listen to them or check their work. Consequently, errors and misconceptions are not corrected.
- Written marking is a weakness and is mainly ticks or praise, with little indication of what a student should do to improve; oral feedback and support are strengths.

Quality of the curriculum in mathematics

The quality of the curriculum in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Students follow different curricular pathways, enabling some to take GCSE early and others to have additional support, which effectively helps those with low prior attainment to experience success. Teachers provide many well-attended support classes before and after school. Statistics is a popular option at GCSE and in the sixth form.
- The schemes of work provide good coverage of the GCSE requirements with time for revision and practice of examination questions but they do not provide the breadth to develop students' skills in solving problems through using and applying mathematics. Teachers have no guidance on approaches that promote conceptual understanding or breadth and progression within topics, so sometimes the work planned is too simple or not sequenced appropriately.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics

The effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics is satisfactory.

- The subject leader has forged a supportive, collaborative department with students' achievement at its heart and driven up progress and attainment effectively. This has been achieved through relentless monitoring and supporting of students, and motivating them to reach high expectations.
- Leaders have identified the need for revised schemes of work and a greater emphasis on investigatory work and problem solving, but have lacked a sharp focus on raising teaching quality to deepen pupils' understanding and prepare them more effectively for using mathematics in the future. Monitoring of teaching and scrutiny of students' work have not been used to pinpoint areas for improvement in teaching, which are sometimes omitted or peripheral and therefore cannot inform targeted professional development. Records of observations of lessons are descriptive and do not evaluate the progress of groups.
- Evaluation uses data accurately to identify strengths and weaknesses and adapt teaching accordingly for individual students and for general areas of weakness. However, analyses do not evaluate critically enough students' understanding or independence, sixth-form progress, teaching quality or consistency of provision. Development plans focus on revision and use of data, rather than raising the overall quality of teaching and assessment. They do not contain measurable success criteria to help gauge impact.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- concentrating teaching more on developing conceptual understanding, solving problems and increasing independence, monitoring students' progress throughout lessons and adapting teaching accordingly so it meets everyone's needs and challenges them

- enhancing the schemes of work to provide guidance in giving conceptual introductions and progression, and to build in the development of skills in using and applying mathematics and problem solving
- monitoring teaching more rigorously to raise its quality and identify and support areas for development, basing evaluations on students' progress
- focusing development plans on key priorities and identifying measurable success criteria in terms of outcomes.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop English and 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

Sue Frater
Her Majesty's Inspector