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Mr J Ferguson
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Ferguson

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 12 and 13 March 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 eight lessons, including one undertaken jointly with a senior manager from the school, and four shorter visits to lessons.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is satisfactory.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Standards are below average in mathematics when students join in Year 7. In particular, many students' recall of basic number facts and facility with mental and written arithmetic skills are weak. These weaknesses remain as students move through the school and contribute to standards that remain low by the end of Key Stage 4.
- The progress of different groups of students has showed no major variation in recent years, although very few higher-attaining students gained grades A or A* at GCSE. Following the appointment of a new head of mathematics at the beginning of this academic year and as a result of actions taken to address underperformance, achievement is now rising securely. While inspection evidence confirms these improvements, a

legacy of underachievement in mathematics continues to affect older year groups in particular. The small number of students following a range of courses in the sixth form make satisfactory progress.

- Most students appreciate the support given by their teachers and are more positive about their learning in mathematics. Most cooperate well in lessons. When given challenging tasks and opportunities to discuss their mathematics or work collaboratively, they respond well. Many students lack confidence when tackling unfamiliar or unstructured problems.

Quality of teaching in mathematics

The quality of teaching in mathematics is satisfactory.

- While teaching is satisfactory overall, there was some good and some inadequate teaching seen during the inspection. In the best instances, teachers plan lessons as a series of episodes, each with a clear purpose. They provide a range of activities to capture and sustain students' interest, including through the use of information and communication technology. Tasks are adapted to meet a range of abilities and needs, and students are provided with opportunities to apply their mathematics, learn collaboratively, and reason and justify their answers.
- In less effective lessons, the pace of learning slows because planning more suited for one hour is stretched out to fit the 100 minutes available. Teachers' expectations are not high enough so that not all students are challenged to produce their best work. Often, too great an emphasis is placed on learning methods and algorithms where students do not fully understand the underpinning concepts. As a consequence, students' learning lacks depth because exercises are chosen that replicate closely the methods and routines being developed. Many such lessons do not build progressively on students' skills, knowledge and understanding, particularly in relation to their recall and application of basic number facts.

Quality of the curriculum in mathematics

The quality of the curriculum in mathematics is satisfactory.

- A range of strategies to raise achievement in the short term has been introduced. A focus on tailoring the curriculum to meet the needs of different groups of students in Year 11 following the results of early entry to GCSE examinations is helping to improve students' confidence in mathematics.
- Although the department shows commitment to collaborative approaches to improving teaching, this work is not routinely captured to inform developments to the schemes of work. As a result, teaching approaches are inconsistent with little formal sharing of good practice. In addition, guidance on how students' skills, knowledge and understanding across all aspects of mathematics, including in using and applying mathematics, are to be developed progressively over time is insufficient.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics

The effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics is satisfactory.

- The head of mathematics provides a strong focus for improvement. As a result, the mathematics department is a more cohesive team that is beginning to collaborate more effectively to improve provision. Assessment information is used well to identify underachievement and provide targeted support, particularly in Key Stage 4.
- Structures for monitoring and evaluating the quality of teaching are in place, but these do not place enough emphasis on the impact of teaching on learning, including over the longer term. The monitoring of students' work concentrates more on aspects of assessment than on assuring curriculum coverage, consistency and depth of students' learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising students' achievement in mathematics by:
 - ensuring a focus on building and securing students' recall of basic number facts and facility with mental and written arithmetic skills
 - placing more emphasis in teaching to developing students' understanding of the concepts underpinning the methods they are taught
 - making sure that all students have frequent opportunities to use and apply their mathematics.
- improving teaching in mathematics by:
 - clarifying the progression in students' skills, knowledge and understanding across all strands of mathematics, including in using and applying mathematics
 - ensuring that the monitoring of teaching focuses on the impact of teaching on learning, and on the quality and consistency of curriculum coverage over time.
 - capturing the teaching approaches and resources arising from collaborative planning in schemes of work

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

Lee Northern
Her Majesty's Inspector