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Mr D Maxwell
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Maxwell

Ofsted 2012–12 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 29 and 30 May 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 five lessons together with shorter visits to 10 more.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is satisfactory.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Attainment is below average. In 2011, the proportion of students gaining GCSE grades A* to C was 52%, compared with a national average of 67%. The proportion of students gaining the highest A* and A grades was low. Overall, attainment rose in 2011. Secure evidence from the school shows that a further rise is likely in 2012.
- Progress measures indicate that, in recent years, fewer students than in most schools make the expected progress over time. Inspection evidence shows current students making satisfactory progress in lessons and this is beginning to have a positive impact on students' long-term progress.
- Over time, most groups, including disabled students and those with special educational needs, achieve in line with others. However, compared with

their peers nationally, fewer students whose needs are identified as 'school action plus' made the expected progress in 2011. Gaps between the achievement of students entitled to free school meals and other students are narrower than is the case nationally.

- In the sixth form, attainment is broadly average and students make satisfactory progress relative to their starting points. Students' achievement at AS is better than at A level.
- In lessons, students generally respond positively to the tasks set and collaborating in pairs. They work well on routine questions but find multi-step problems difficult and sometimes struggle to know where to start. Similarly, students are far more confident in solving equations than in setting up equations to solve a problem. Some students work well only when closely supervised.

Quality of teaching in mathematics

The quality of teaching in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Teachers use mini-whiteboards effectively to monitor learning and to ensure that most students are involved in question and answer sessions. They model answers well, and refer regularly to how the work relates to National Curriculum levels or examination grades. As a result, students know how well they are progressing towards their targets. Several teachers use timed tasks effectively to maintain the pace of learning.
- Some teaching stresses mathematical techniques too much and, as a result, gives insufficient emphasis to building students' understanding of underlying concepts. In some lessons, teaching does not spark or maintain students' interest and, consequently, students become passive and their learning slows.
- Work is not always pitched at the right level to maximise progress. Some more-able students are not being fully stretched.

Quality of the curriculum in mathematics

The quality of the curriculum in mathematics is satisfactory.

- The scheme of work for Key Stage 3 provides satisfactory guidance on content and progression. Reference to some resources are included but could be expanded to incorporate a wider range of activities. At Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form, the schemes follow closely the specifications laid down by the awarding bodies. In the main school, the schemes have too little explicit reference to where students develop their skills in using and applying mathematics and how these skills build up progressively.
- In the sixth form, students have the opportunity to study A levels in mathematics and further mathematics. Flexible tuition arrangements support students wishing to improve their GCSE grade. Advanced mathematics groups are among the largest groups in the sixth form, with a big increase in interest from the current Year 11.

- The school provides several support structures, including extra classes, revision guides and engaging parental support, aimed at helping students to improve their achievement in mathematics. Many students take advantage of subject-specific computer-based packages that they access from home.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics

The effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics is satisfactory.

- Improvements in provision and outcomes are evident. Teachers are working together more and sharing examples of good practice. The school's records show that teaching has improved and more students are making the expected progress. Relative to national figures, GCSE results rose in 2011, although the proportions of students reaching key thresholds remained steady. The school recognises that recent improvements need to be consolidated and extended further.
- Leaders and managers have an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses of the department. They identify correctly where teaching is strong and where and how it can improve.
- Leaders and managers give a high priority to improving outcomes in mathematics. They have allocated additional resources for teaching, management and staff development. For example, staff development has included use of external consultants and visits by staff to other schools. These initiatives are beginning to have a positive impact.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising attainment and increasing progress, especially for more-able students
- improving teaching so that it is consistently good or better, through
 - focusing on developing students' conceptual understanding, not just the mastery of techniques
 - ensuring that students are actively engaged in learning
- developing the curriculum further to ensure that students' skills in using and applying mathematics are developed systematically so that students can tackle extended problems more successfully.

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