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Mr J Fletcher
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Fletcher

Ofsted 2012–13 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visits on 22 May, and on 10 and 11 July 2012 to look at work in mathematics.

The visits 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, analyses of students' work, the observation of eight lessons, three of which were observed jointly with senior staff, and shorter visits to four other lessons.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is inadequate.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is inadequate.

- Students' attainment by the end of Key Stage 4 has been significantly below national averages for the last three years. This is because students make inadequate progress from starting points that are broadly average. The proportion achieving GCSE A* to C grades was significantly lower than average in 2011 and was particularly low for boys, with only 43% achieving a grade C or better. Targets for 2010 and 2011 were missed.
- Some students in the sixth form feel more confident about their achievements in mathematics but too many in Year 12, this year and last year, made inadequate progress. The numbers that have completed A-level mathematics in recent years have been very small.

- Analyses of students' current achievement indicate that the decline in attainment evident over the last few years has been arrested and that GCSE outcomes in mathematics are likely to improve to be nearer to national averages this year. This is due to effective intervention from senior leaders which has led to after-school revision sessions and one-to-one support based on regular and close tracking of students' progress undertaken at whole-school level. Achievement in Key Stage 3 is better this year and more students are beginning to make appropriate progress.
- Students' attitudes to mathematics are generally positive. Behaviour is satisfactory except when teaching fails to motivate and engage; at these times, students lose interest and some misbehave. No mechanisms exist for students to express their views of the quality of their learning in mathematics to the department.

Quality of teaching in mathematics

The quality of teaching in mathematics is inadequate.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge and are ambitious for students' achievement, but strategies to check students' progress during lessons are underdeveloped. As a consequence, teachers do not always know that some students are struggling, and why. Teaching sometimes fails to communicate the real point of the learning. Senior staff are aware that this means that too much of the teaching is inadequate or no better than satisfactory.
- Features of good practice in teaching are not identified and shared across the department. During the inspection staff showed interest in discussing the influence of teaching strategies on students' quality of learning. However, they have few organised opportunities to do this and to devise department-wide responses.
- The quality of marking across the department is very variable. Too much simply recognises work being completed or a respectable effort having been made, rather than diagnosing misconceptions and setting specific challenges to extend individuals' understanding.

Quality of the curriculum in mathematics

The quality of the curriculum in mathematics is inadequate.

- The curriculum is insufficiently well organised and managed. No mechanisms exist to ensure that all students gain an appreciation of the uses and application of mathematics, and develop problem-solving skills. Neither is there any coordinated approach to using information and communication technology to support learning. Important connections between aspects of mathematics across different topics are not made clear enough.
- Until very recently, no written documentation was provided for steering teaching and learning. Teachers and students follow sets of textbooks to guide their work; differences of approach between various sets of books cause disconnections in students' learning, especially in algebra.

- Some students undertake early GCSE entries in mathematics; this leads to some ending their study of this subject in order to undertake more work in English or science if they are deemed to have already made the progress expected of them. This denies them the opportunity to make further progress in mathematics at GCSE and beyond.
- The A-level course provides a good level of challenge for students which some relish. However, too many begin the course with an insufficiently strong grasp of GCSE work and are not able to progress adequately.
- Students have few opportunities to extend their mathematical interests by way of enhancement or enrichment opportunities.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics

The effectiveness of leadership and management in mathematics is inadequate.

- Leadership in mathematics is not addressing important shortcomings in the work of the department. The quality of the monitoring and evaluation undertaken is inadequate; this denies insight into current strengths and developmental priorities and limits the capacity to plan for improvement. The subject leader's evaluation of the work of the department is overgenerous and is not rooted securely in evidence.
- Improvements to the quality of teaching are not driven strongly or coherently. Staff lack guidance about how to improve their teaching. The good quality whole-school development opportunities are not carried through into the work of the department. Department-based professional development is inadequate.
- The curriculum is managed inadequately which means that too few students have a coherent and stimulating experience of mathematics.
- The senior leadership team and governing body demonstrate good insight into the department's current situation and what needs to improve. Senior leaders judge the quality of teaching accurately and offer effective support to the work of the department. Some actions are beginning to have a positive effect but much still remains to be done to address the legacy of underachievement.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- strengthening the leadership and management of the department by:
 - establishing a clear vision for work in mathematics, centred on the achievement of all groups of students
 - enacting a rigorous programme of monitoring and evaluation of all aspects of the department's work to be able to recognise and use existing strengths, and plan to make the necessary improvements
 - supporting teachers to raise the quality of their work, especially their use of assessment in lessons and in planning

- building a curriculum that matches students' learning needs, and encourages, guides, and coordinates a wider range of teaching and learning styles.

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

Alan Taylor-Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector