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4 February 2013

Mr Bill Scriven
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Scriven

Ofsted 2012–13 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 January 2013 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 seven lessons and short visits to a further five.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is outstanding.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is outstanding.

- Attainment is high and improving strongly. In 2012, A-level pass rates were high with more students than average achieving high grades. Likewise at GCSE, a high percentage of students obtained a grade C or above with more than average achieving an A* or A grade. The school's reliable data for the current Year 11 and sixth form indicate even better outcomes for 2013. An increasing number of students plan to study for mathematics-related degrees.
- Students make very good progress in lessons. They enjoy mathematics and begin to develop self-reliance from Year 7. Students of all ages volunteer ideas, help each other and use mathematical language well. Written work is of a consistently high standard and students' books show that learning builds quickly and securely over time. Sixth formers have an

excellent attitude to work. They are very capable, independent learners who bounce ideas off each other and spur one another on.

- Target setting and the monitoring of students' progress are very robust. Ambitious targets are set which students can raise further through individual negotiation with their teacher. Many, especially boys, respond well to an extra challenge.

Quality of teaching in mathematics

The quality of teaching in mathematics is outstanding.

- Teaching is consistently good and much is outstanding. Lessons are planned thoroughly and teachers adapt quickly if the need arises. Lessons move at a lively pace. Investigative work prompts students to 'think outside the box' and use skills from other subjects. Practice exercises and regular recaps ensure that learning is secure.
- Teachers are creative and are not afraid to hand responsibility for learning over to the students. For instance, teachers often let students choose whether to do further consolidation exercises or to try more challenging questions. Students are encouraged to use classmates as a resource and to write tips and reminders in their books to help them revise.
- Teachers have very strong questioning skills that are used to stretch students' thinking, to check on learning or to tease out ideas and misunderstandings. Incorrect answers are used very effectively and students are often asked to find mistakes in others' solutions as a way of testing their own understanding.
- Teaching assistants work very effectively with teachers and provide high quality support. They have good subject knowledge and are involved in devising schemes of work.

Quality of the curriculum in mathematics

The quality of the curriculum in mathematics is outstanding.

- The curriculum is extremely flexible and responsive. Changes and decisions are made to meet the specific needs of different groups. For example, decisions about students' early entry for GCSE are made on an individual student basis each year and AS units are offered to very gifted mathematicians in the main school.
- Schemes of work are well-planned and easy to follow. They provide good guidance to new teachers yet allow room for innovation and the flexibility to respond to students' needs as they arise. The Key Stage 4 curriculum becomes increasingly personalised as students prepare for their examinations. 'Mock' papers are analysed question by question so that each student knows the topics or skills they need to focus on.
- An array of extra activities and individual support enhances the curriculum. Teachers give freely of their time out of lessons and a weekly drop-in surgery is highly valued by students. Sixth-form mathematicians mentor younger students very successfully. Students enjoy entering national

competitions and a club for budding mathematicians provides opportunity to really stretch their thinking.

- The department actively promotes the development of literacy skills. The team has been trained by the English department. A number of the mathematics teachers are visiting primary schools this year to learn more about literacy development.
- A wealth of professional development is available for the staff and bespoke training is arranged if necessary. However, the most effective development has come from sharing the outstanding practice that exists within the team.

Effectiveness of leadership and management of mathematics

The effectiveness of leadership and management of mathematics is outstanding.

- The new heads of department have re-energised mathematics over the last few years and built a very vibrant and successful department. The two heads of department have different but complementary skills and clearly defined responsibilities that play to their strengths. They are driving improvements at a fast but well-judged pace.
- The heads of department have an accurate view of the department and development plans are supporting further improvements well. They collaborate with other departments, such as English, to share best practice and play a leading role in a number of school-wide initiatives.
- The mathematics team has an excellent blend of experience, enthusiasm and creativity. Members of the team work very well together, despite being on two sites, and share a common sense of purpose and consistency in practice.
- The rigorous management systems that are in place are all the more effective because of their in-built flexibility. The tracking of students' progress is very robust and the department is at the forefront of developments to focus effort and remedial action where it is most needed.

Areas for improvement

The visit has identified no areas for improvement that are not already being addressed effectively.

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

Jan Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector