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Mr A Billings
Principal
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Dear Mr Billings

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 28 and 29 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: meetings with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; observation of seven lessons, including four undertaken jointly with staff from the academy, and shorter visits to six further lessons.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is good.

Achievement in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is good.

- Students join the academy with levels of attainment in mathematics that are typically higher than those seen nationally. In 2012, the proportions of students meeting or exceeding the government's benchmark measure of three or more levels of progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 rose to at least match that of other secondary schools across the country. More than a quarter of pupils secured an A or A* grade in GCSE mathematics, which is significantly above the national average. Inspection evidence confirms that the trend of improvement is being maintained.
- Almost all groups of students progress at similar rates with little difference in the attainment of boys and girls in 2012. However, some low-attaining

students and some students eligible for free school meals make slower progress than their peers; this is because of inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and the curriculum.

- Students studying mathematics courses in the sixth form achieve well. The subject's popularity leads to a high proportion of students choosing to continue to study mathematics after GCSE.

Quality of teaching in mathematics

The quality of teaching in mathematics is good.

- Almost all lessons in mathematics are characterised by a purposeful and productive atmosphere. Students enjoy tackling practical tasks and respond enthusiastically to opportunities to work together and discuss their mathematics. Teachers work hard to encourage a 'can-do' culture where students 'take risks' in learning. For example, in an outstanding Year 12 lesson, students showed great maturity in working collaboratively on a matching task and, with admirable perseverance, were able to deduce the laws of logarithms for themselves.
- Most teaching seeks to develop students' conceptual understanding of mathematics. In a Year 9 lesson, students enjoyed discussing whether certain equations and identities were 'always, sometimes or never' true. Through discussion with each other, they were able to apply their knowledge of directed numbers and algebraic expressions confidently and accurately. However, in some instances, learning is less effective because teachers move too quickly to rules and techniques before the underpinning ideas are fully understood. For some low-attaining students in particular, this means that sometimes they do not fully understand the application and limitations of the rules and procedures they learn.

Quality of the curriculum in mathematics

The quality of the curriculum in mathematics is good.

- The curriculum provides suitable opportunities for students to be successful by the end of Key Stage 4. Under existing arrangements, Key Stage 3 is completed at the end of Year 8 and students begin their GCSE programmes in Year 9, with some further reorganisation of teaching groups at the start of Year 10. Early entry to GCSE is sharply targeted on only those pupils who will benefit from this approach.
- A dedicated space on the academy's network is used by staff to share a wealth of lesson planning and resources. However, while best practice and agreed approaches are discussed informally, they are not captured effectively in existing schemes of work, resulting in some inconsistency in teaching. Further refinement is also needed in order to secure stronger progression in learning, particularly from Key Stage 3 to Key stage 4.
- Almost all the teachers are specialist teachers of mathematics. A small amount of teaching for some of the lowest sets is by non-specialist or newly qualified teachers. The quality of guidance for teachers and

teaching assistants requires improvement as it does not support them well enough to fully meet the needs of students in these classes. Teachers' planning does not always identify precisely enough how teaching assistants will be deployed in order to target support more effectively.

Effectiveness of leadership and management of mathematics

The effectiveness of leadership and management of mathematics is good.

- The mathematics faculty are a committed and enthusiastic team who support each other well. There is a clear vision for good and outstanding learning in mathematics. Improvements in each of the last three years in the overall rates of students' progress demonstrate good capacity to improve further.
- Senior leaders and the head of faculty undertake regular monitoring of teaching and understand clearly the actions required to bring about further improvement. Judgements reached following lessons observed jointly with the inspector were accurate, although senior leaders were not precise enough in pinpointing the subject-specific areas for improvement in the teaching. The regular scrutiny of students' work is an integral part of the monitoring process. However, the academy needs to develop more detailed criteria for evaluating the quality of students' learning in mathematics as part of this process.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- strengthening the quality of provision for the lowest-attaining students by:
 - improving the quality of the guidance for non-specialist or less-experienced teachers who teach these classes
 - ensuring that the work of teaching assistants in these classes is targeted more effectively
- developing sharply focused criteria for evaluating the quality of learning when undertaking scrutiny of students' work in mathematics
- ensuring that guidance within the scheme of work provides for clear progression in learning and secures students' deeper conceptual understanding of the mathematics they learn.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop mathematics in the academy.

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

Lee Northern
Her Majesty's Inspector