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Mrs A Cullum
Principal
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Dear Mrs Cullum

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 25 and 26 February 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, analyses of students' work, and observation of nine lessons, five of which were undertaken jointly with senior staff.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is good.

Achievement in mathematics is good.

- Students arrive at the school with above-average standards in mathematics. They make good progress and achieve GCSE results which are significantly better than the national average. The proportion of students making better than expected progress is higher than national averages for students of all levels of ability.
- Mathematics is a popular subject at A level. Students make the progress expected of them and achieve good grades. Achievement in the two year A-level course is better than at AS.
- Students have very positive attitudes to mathematics; they regard it as an important subject and are prepared to work hard to do well. Many enjoy the intellectual challenge involved and demonstrate a good capacity to

work together, share ideas and support each other. Behaviour is usually good, and is sometimes outstanding.

- All groups of students make good progress over Key Stages 3 and 4, but the very small number of students eligible for the pupil premium do not achieve as well as their peers.
- Students do not have chance to contribute to the development of mathematics in the school, and say that they would relish working with their teachers and with senior staff in this way.

Teaching in mathematics is good.

- Teachers have good knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses in individual students' understanding of different topics. Good use is made of this knowledge to address any shortfall in a student's performance and enable all students to make at least good progress. Teachers direct appropriate questions at individuals in class discussions, and maintain good levels of challenge for all.
- Teachers ensure that students acquire a firm grasp of each topic. By Key Stage 4, many students are fluent in important mathematical techniques. The degree to which links are made between all areas of mathematics varies between teachers, as does time given to reflect on learning and refine and compare methods. When this happens effectively, students say that they 'like to see the whole picture', and value this sense of the coherence of the subject.
- In the best lessons, students are given opportunity to work cooperatively and to think problems through for themselves. In these situations, students develop impressive resilience and confidence in their learning.
- Some teaching relies heavily on textbooks; this can deny students opportunities to develop a deep understanding of some ideas. At other times, starter activities are too long and students would benefit from beginning more challenging work sooner.

The curriculum in mathematics is good.

- Schemes of work offer good structure and guidance for teachers. The mathematics team is currently developing an on-line resource base which should help to disseminate good practice by capturing individual teachers' good ideas.
- A good range of extra-curricular opportunities supports learning in mathematics. Links are forged with a number of universities, and students participate in competitions nationally and those organised locally. Students in Key Stage 4 benefit from a number of revision opportunities arranged after school and in holidays, and those who struggle with mathematics in Key Stage 3 are offered specially tailored support.
- Good links are developing with other subjects. For example, the timing of the delivery of certain topics is coordinated across mathematics and science A levels. The coordination of numeracy skills across the school is not as well developed as literacy but plans are in place to address this.

- Opportunities for students to use information and communication technology in lessons are very limited because there is no easy access to computers.
- The use and application of mathematics is well represented in schemes of work, and investigative work is integral to students' experiences.

Leadership and management of mathematics are good.

- The curriculum area manager has an accurate sense of its strengths and development priorities. Systems to track students' progress use good quality data derived from a range of assessment sources, and drive interventions with precision. Honest and thorough self-evaluation supports planning well.
- The curriculum area management team, and senior staff, gauge the quality of teaching accurately and with sufficient regularity. They use performance management systems to support necessary improvements in teaching. However, no definition has been agreed of what constitutes outstanding teaching and learning in the subject, to steer its overall development.
- The curriculum area manager maintains high expectations of teaching and outcomes for students and successfully encourages a collegial approach within the team. Opportunities to discuss in depth how specific aspects of students' learning can be improved are infrequent, however.
- Some aspects of the curriculum area's work are not well focused. For example, although many teachers mark students' work well, there is no agreed approach. This means that students experience a range of ways of obtaining feedback and guidance as they move between teachers, and the best practice is not propagated effectively.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the progress made by students during Year 12 to enable them to achieve better AS-level results and to lay stronger foundations for Year 13 study
- defining, through discussion, a shared view of what constitutes 'outstanding' teaching in mathematics in the school, and using the description as the basis of performance management and professional development.

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