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Dr R Steward
Headteacher
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Dear Dr Steward

Ofsted 2013–14 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 11 and 12 November 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, students and a group of local primary headteachers; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of nine lessons and a one-to-one support session.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics is outstanding.

Achievement in mathematics is outstanding.

- Students make outstanding progress in Key Stages 3 and 4, building on their above average attainment on entry. As a result, GCSE attainment is high, with most students making at least the progress expected from their starting points and many make better than expected progress. Achievement is good at A level, particularly for the most able students.
- Very few students are supported by the Pupil Premium, which provides extra funding for disadvantaged students. Overall, boys attain slightly better than girls. Creditably, 60% of disabled students and those with special educational needs gained A* to C grades in GCSE mathematics in 2013. Students have few gaps in learning because the department identifies their strengths and weaknesses and provides appropriate support.

- Students are able to explain their ideas and justify their methods well orally, but less well in writing. For example, students are sometimes allowed to persist with informal working in their work on equations, when a more formal layout would better support their algebraic reasoning. Sixth-form students have strong algebraic skills because they follow a pre-course bridging unit.
- Students are self-motivated and keen to learn. They ask questions to develop their own understanding. They are particularly pleased that teachers know them as individuals and tailor their teaching accordingly. They appreciate the mathematics support available, both in organised 'mathematics clinic' sessions and from teachers at lunchtimes.

Teaching in mathematics is outstanding.

- Teaching over time is outstanding because it leads to rapid progress and highly developed levels of skills, knowledge and understanding. Teachers use questioning very effectively to probe students' knowledge and understanding. All students are engaged, for example by writing answers on mini-whiteboards so the teacher can check all responses. Harder work is made available to stretch the most able students.
- Most teachers are very good at monitoring students as they work and adapting their approach for individuals or for the whole class, based on the information they gather. Because teachers take risks in trying innovative approaches, not all lessons work perfectly, but the teachers are skilled at adapting their teaching within a lesson or in subsequent lessons to ensure progress is sustained over time. The level of thinking by teachers about their students' needs is an outstanding feature of the department.
- The best marking creates a dialogue between student and teacher, with extra challenges being set and followed up. Across the department, marking is not consistently this good because, sometimes, challenges are not set or the responses are not checked.

The curriculum in mathematics is outstanding.

- Members of the department have worked over several years to build rich activities into the schemes of work and to incorporate guidance on preferred approaches to different topics. New approaches to teaching are trialled and evaluated by groups of teachers. The schemes of work incorporate lots of developmental activities, problem solving, investigations and use of information and communication technology (ICT). However, there are variations in students' experience of ICT within mathematics.
- The high quality of departmental guidance and the very strong team approach means that all students are taught in a way that emphasises independent thinking, self-reliance and the expectation that mathematics should be comprehensible.
- Students' conceptual development is promoted through the use of visual aids and practical resources but teachers also understand the importance

of consolidating skills through graduated exercises. The department believes strongly that time spent laying foundations properly is richly rewarded with a faster pace of learning further down the line. A good pace of learning is achieved by including some lessons where students struggle with new ideas, working quite slowly as they develop their understanding.

Leadership and management of mathematics are outstanding.

- The head of department plans the work of the department in great detail. The electronic departmental handbook provides many resources, clear guidance and deep analysis. The departmental self-evaluation is rigorous, with very careful analysis of the performance of different sets.
- The department's capacity to improve is outstanding and professional development is a major strength. Leaders have built up a learning culture among staff to the extent that all are expected to take part in triads, where groups of three teachers work together to research and develop teaching. This has resulted in an unusually reflective and thoughtful team of mathematics teachers. The school is sharing its expertise by extending this approach to include teachers from other schools.
- The school works very hard to ensure that all students experience high quality teaching that develops their understanding and their fluency. The school intervenes to support disadvantaged students, those whose progress has slowed, disabled students and those with special educational needs. However, leaders have not analysed the effectiveness of the different types of intervention, for example, by comparing the progress of supported and non-supported students.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- increasing the consistency of marking so it is all highly effective
- analysing individual interventions to evaluate their effectiveness
- ensuring students all get opportunities to use ICT packages such as graph plotters, geometry and algebra packages and spreadsheets as tools in their mathematical learning.

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

As explained previously, 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

Stephen Abbott
Her Majesty's Inspector