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Mrs P Hanrahan
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Hanrahan

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 5 and 6 March 2014 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 eight lessons, two jointly with senior leaders; and shorter visits to three other lessons accompanied by a senior leader.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics requires improvement.

Achievement in mathematics requires improvement.

- The school is recovering from a period of uncertainty about its future during which fewer students joined the school, particularly higher-attaining students. Compared with recent years, the achievement of the current Year 11 cohort points to a significant improvement. Early indications for 2014 suggest that the proportion of students likely to make the expected progress from their starting points is broadly average but with too few students making better than expected progress.
- In Key Stage 3, many students are making good progress, particularly lower-attaining students. Other students make slower progress, often because they repeat work already learned.
- Over half of the students in the school are supported by the pupil premium, which provides extra funding for disadvantaged students. In 2013, students known to be eligible for this funding attained almost one GCSE grade lower on average than their peers. The school's data for

eligible students currently in Year 11 show that the proportion making expected progress or better is increasing and the gap is closing rapidly.

- The achievement of students who are disabled or who have special educational needs is good. Teaching assistants plan work with teachers and are effective in supporting students in lessons
- In previous years, the school prepared Key Stage 4 students for entry to their GCSE a year early. This restricted some students' achievement because, having attained a grade C, they did not want to retake GCSE to improve their grade. Consequently, early entry has been discontinued. Leaders have worked hard to improve students' aspirations in mathematics through inspirational speakers and work with colleges and universities.
- Students have positive attitudes to mathematics. They greatly appreciate the help they receive from their teachers but some rely too heavily on this and are reluctant to work things out for themselves. Where learning is strongest, students understand why their method works rather than depending on a procedural 'rule' without any understanding.

Teaching in mathematics requires improvement.

- The quality of teaching varies from outstanding to requires improvement. Most teaching features detailed planning that builds on what students already know and challenges them further. Some teachers are highly skilled in the way they question students and encourage them to think deeper to improve their answers. Opportunities to work and discuss in pairs or groups help students to make good progress.
- A key weakness in the teaching that required improvement was that teachers did not find out in sufficient detail why students are struggling or help them sufficiently to improve their understanding. For example, in a lesson on converting between 12- and 24-hour clock times, the teacher did not identify quickly enough that students could not tell the time.
- Work in books shows inconsistencies in marking and in the information given to students to help them to improve their work. Some teachers are skilled in identifying misconceptions and in giving students specific tasks to fill gaps in learning. Other marking does not require students to respond and students do not make use of guidance in future work.

The curriculum in mathematics requires improvement.

- Schemes of work indicate the order of coverage of topics for the different groups. Decisions as to how the topics should be taught, or the resources that should be used, are left to individual teachers' preferences. This leads to unhelpful inconsistencies in the appropriateness of activities given to students and does not support less experienced teachers or non-specialists with planning.
- Some students have little opportunity to solve problems or to carry out investigations or practical work. Most students have a regular timetabled lesson in a computer suite, but not all teachers make effective use of this time to use mathematical software related to topics being taught.

- Numeracy across the curriculum is well developed. Teachers have identified where topics taught in mathematics align with their own subject. Students say this has helped them understand how their mathematical skills help their learning in other subjects.
- 'Give it a Go' week provides all students with an opportunity to carry out an investigation through an extended piece of work such as finding out about the effects of exercise on pulse rate.

Leadership and management of mathematics require improvement.

- Senior leaders carry out monitoring through regular lesson observations, checking marking in books, and talking to students about their learning. They have an accurate overview of the work of the department. Where they identify concerns, they intervene, and are developing a range of strategies to raise achievement and to improve the quality of teaching.
- Teachers are being helped to improve their practice through partnerships with an outstanding school and support from an external consultant. Bespoke programmes address areas for development identified from lesson observation. Likewise, leaders have devised tailored support to strengthen the leadership and management skills of the subject leader.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- accelerating the progress made by Key Stage 3 students, ensuring work builds on previous learning
- sharing the good practice that already exists in the department by providing opportunities for teachers to observe each other's practice and to see examples of good marking
- ensuring schemes of work include:
 - guidance on teaching approaches and depth of coverage for each topic
 - identified opportunities to solve problems and to carry out investigations and practical work
 - clear links to good-quality resources that support effective learning, taking account of the topic and the students' starting points
- increasing the effectiveness of the leadership of mathematics by monitoring the impact of the support provided for the subject leader, and responding quickly to any future needs that emerge.

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

Denah Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector