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Mr A Davis
Principal
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Dear Mr Davis

Ofsted 2014–15 subject survey inspection programme: mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 9 and 10 June 2015 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; observations of learning in 10 visits to lessons, all undertaken jointly with leaders from the school; and short visits to two intervention sessions for students preparing for the GCSE statistics examination.

Leadership and management of mathematics

- Leaders have high aspirations for students' achievement in mathematics. They ensure that a good range of support is provided for students to help them to catch up if they fall behind. Leaders' analysis of outcomes in mathematics is detailed and takes account of different groups of students. Directors keep a close eye on performance in mathematics and leaders take robust action where teaching is weak.
- However, when reviewing the quality of mathematics teaching, leaders do not take enough account of how well students are helped to understand the mathematics they learn. Checks on the quality of teaching do not always consider the progress made by different groups of students, including disadvantaged students. Improvement points identified for staff following these checks are not always followed up rigorously enough.

- Leaders consider carefully how teachers should be deployed to maximise students' achievement. However, this approach does not address the improvements needed in the quality of teaching across the subject.

The curriculum in mathematics

- Leaders in mathematics have begun to develop some new approaches to teaching in Year 7. However, these changes to the curriculum have not placed enough emphasis on deepening students' understanding of mathematics alongside developing their knowledge and proficiency in techniques. Sometimes, students are asked to tackle harder topics before they are ready because their understanding of the underpinning concepts is not fully secure.
- Although the guidance provided to teachers makes clear the topics to be covered in each year group, it does not provide enough support in how to develop good mathematical learning. Although a large bank of useful resources is also available, it is not linked clearly to teachers' guidance. As a result, approaches teachers use to teach mathematics are inconsistent, which sometimes hampers subsequent learning.

Teaching in mathematics

- Teaching is successful in helping students to understand the requirements of their examinations in mathematics. Teachers use assessment information well to identify the support that students need. A comprehensive and wide-ranging package of intervention and additional support has a notable impact on students' achievement. Teachers show a great deal of commitment to this programme, including in their own time. However, not all students benefit by attending these sessions, including some disadvantaged students.
- In lessons, teachers ensure that students are pushed hard to work on challenging topics. However, too many students think mathematics is made up of rules and methods that they must learn. As one student remarked: 'You don't need to understand it, you just need to do it'. This is because too much teaching does not strike a good balance between teaching techniques and helping students to understand the mathematics they are learning. In addition, too little teaching provides good opportunities for students to develop their reasoning skills. These factors combine to prevent many students from making even faster progress.

Achievement in mathematics

- Many students make progress that is at least in line with national expectations and a higher proportion than nationally do better than this.
- Attainment by the end of Key Stage 4 is above the national average overall. In each of the last three years, girls have achieved more highly than boys in GCSE mathematics. In the sixth form, students' progress in A-level mathematics is broadly in line with other students nationally.

- The achievement of disadvantaged students in mathematics is lower than that of other students in the academy. For example, in 2014, the attainment of disadvantaged students in GCSE mathematics was, on average, more than two and a half grades lower than for other students at the academy. Leaders are taking action to address this underachievement. Nevertheless, it is too soon to see the full impact of this work and, as a result, there remain weaknesses in the achievement of disadvantaged students in mathematics across the academy.
- The academy has high expectations of its most able students. For example, students who complete GCSE statistics before Year 11 do well. However, although the most able students tackle a wide range of challenging topics in their lessons, they are not always helped to gain a deeper understanding of the mathematics they learn.
- Students work well in their lessons and relationships are good. They enjoy being challenged and show good attitudes to their learning. However, sometimes teachers' expectations of the quality of students' work are too low. This means that some students do not take enough pride in the work they produce.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- Ensuring teaching is effective in developing students' deeper understanding of the mathematics they learn, including by:
 - ensuring an effective balance in the curriculum between moving rapidly through topics to be covered and developing depth of understanding and progression in learning
 - improving the quality of guidance provided to teachers to support their planning, particularly in relation to teaching approaches and students' progression in learning
 - ensuring leaders' checks on teaching identify more effectively how to improve learning in mathematics
 - placing a consistent focus on ensuring disadvantaged students receive high quality teaching which helps them catch up quickly and make good progress.

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 and the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Lee Northern
Her Majesty's Inspector