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Dear Mr Peck

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Information and
Communication Technology (ICT) and mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my joint visit with George Knights to look at work in ICT and mathematics between the 20-22 November.

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. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at ICT, the visit had a particular focus on the assessment of ICT and the readiness of the school for the onscreen Key Stage 3 ICT test. In mathematics the visit had a particular focus on students' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of lessons. The overall effectiveness of ICT was judged to be good. The overall effectiveness of mathematics was also judged to be good.

ICT

The overall effectiveness of ICT was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Students' achievement in ICT is satisfactory.

- Standards in ICT are below average in the main school. Students make satisfactory progress in ICT by the end of Year 11.
- The proportion of Year 9 students achieving National Curriculum Level 5 or higher, in their end of year national tests is below that expected nationally for ICT but is similar to that for English and mathematics in the school.
- At Key Stage 4, the percentage of students gaining an A* to C equivalent grade in GNVQ ICT declined this year and this was extremely disappointing. Students currently on this course are making good progress and are producing work of a high standard.
- Students in the sixth form make very good progress given their prior achievement. They demonstrate high standards in the use of complex software for design, web development and project management.
- Whilst students in Key Stage 4 have many opportunities to study ICT and to use ICT in a range of vocational programmes, the development of their ICT capability across the curriculum is inconsistent. Their experiences are not sufficiently monitored nor formally mapped against the ICT programme of study.
- Students' behaviour in ICT lessons and in lessons involving the use of ICT is good. They enjoy ICT, are confident and they collaborate well when working together or when sharing computers.

Quality of teaching and learning of ICT

The quality of teaching and learning in ICT is good.

- ICT teachers have a very good knowledge of their subject, particularly the requirements of the vocational examinations in Key Stage 4 and post-16.
- There are good opportunities for all staff to extend their expertise in the use of specific software packages including specialist areas such as digital photography, video editing and animation.
- In one outstanding lesson observed, Year 7 students were given excellent opportunities to use ICT to be creative and independent and as a result produced complex designs to a high standard.
- Generally, lessons observed demonstrate that teachers have high expectations for student behaviour and establish clear protocols for the use of ICT resources and rooms. Lessons are well planned to ensure that students are purposeful and active participants.

- Students enjoy using ICT facilities. Their ability to critically review, modify and evaluate their ICT work however, is not always as well developed as their skills and knowledge of specialist software packages.
- Teachers make good use of their laptop computers and in lessons observed, the interactive whiteboards were used well to enhance students' learning.

Quality of curriculum

The ICT curriculum is good.

- Students enjoy many elements of the curriculum, particularly being able to use specialist software and to complete real and interesting tasks.
- The use and adaptation of national strategy materials is improving at Key Stage 3 and very good use is made of the Local Authority support to ensure coverage of the programme of study.
- The range of ICT courses offered in Key Stage 4 is well designed to meet the needs of most students. There are good progression opportunities for those wishing to continue their study of ICT at Advanced Level and in the sixth form.
- The school is in the process of developing remote access to the network to enable students and staff to access their work and support materials from home.

Leadership and management of ICT

Leadership and management of ICT are good.

- There is a whole school vision for ICT which links well with the building schools of the future plans and outlines the way forward for ICT across the school. ICT is given a high priority in the School Improvement Plan which makes clear the school's intentions to promote innovation in teaching and learning and to further extend the use of new technologies.
- All staff have good access to laptop computers and interactive whiteboards and have been well supported in developing the skills to use these effectively. Opportunities to share effective practice have added to teachers' confidence and skills when using ICT.
- At present, the use of the intranet to support students' learning varies from subject to subject. While there is some good sharing and dissemination of resources and ideas between staff, this is not yet well developed across all subjects.

- The head of subject is well supported by other staff from within the department and by the Senior Leadership Team. The organisation of roles and responsibilities within the department are clear and effective.
- Members of the ICT department have completed an accurate self evaluation of ICT which demonstrates a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses within the subject. Areas for improvement are generally well communicated although more emphasis needs to be placed on raising standards and achievement in ICT.

Assessment of ICT and the readiness of the school for the onscreen Key Stage 3 ICT test

Assessment in ICT is satisfactory.

- The initial assessment of students' ICT capabilities on entry to Year 7 lacks rigour and as a result, individual attainment targets are not always sufficiently challenging for students.
- The deployment of more specialist teachers, the introduction of more frequent and informative assessment opportunities and an increased emphasis on the moderation process since the time of the last inspection is contributing to improvements in the consistency and accuracy of Key Stage 3 ICT assessments.
- The monitoring of the progress of individual students in Key Stage 4 and post-16 continues to be successful. Regular formal and informal assessments enable teachers to provide good support and encouragement for students, particularly those at risk of underachieving.
- The school is well prepared for the onscreen Key Stage 3 ICT test but staff were disappointed that those entered generally achieved one level lower than predicted. The school has learned valuable lessons for the future and is planning to implement the test for a larger group of students in 2007.

Inclusion

Inclusion is good.

- All students benefit from opportunities to use ICT facilities outside of lesson times. This ensures that none are disadvantaged when completing homework or research activities.
- The wide range of vocational courses available provides opportunities for students of all abilities to gain valuable ICT skills and helps to prepare them for further education and future employment.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included to:

- improve the rigour of the initial assessment of students' prior attainment in ICT in Year 7, so that any underachievement can be identified at the earliest possible stage
- monitor and record students' ICT experiences in Key Stage 4 to ensure that they fulfil the requirements of the programme of study
- ensure that the effective use of ICT to support students' learning is more consistent across all subjects.

Mathematics

The overall effectiveness of mathematics was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Students' achievement in mathematics is good.

- Standards are below average but results have improved steadily in recent years, both in national tests at the end of Year 9 and in GCSE examinations.
- Students achieve well throughout the school, and particularly well in algebra, where they display skill and confidence in algebraic manipulation.
- Students' abilities in using and applying mathematics are a little lower than in other aspects of the subject.
- Students enjoy the subject, they work hard and are keen to do well. However many do not take enough care or pride in their written work.

Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching and learning in mathematics are good.

- Teachers provide lively, stimulating and interesting lessons with a good match of tasks to the needs of students.
- Teachers make good use of the readily available teaching aids, including data projectors and interactive whiteboards.
- Teachers pay careful attention to skills development, particularly in algebra.
- Some, but not all, teachers are becoming adept at encouraging students to explain, describe and model their mathematics and this is helping improve students' understanding.
- The assessment of students' work is improving and students are becoming increasingly skilled at self-assessment. However, the marking of students' written work is not good enough. It does not give students enough guidance on how to improve the quality of their work.

Quality of the curriculum

The mathematics curriculum is satisfactory.

- Good attempts are made to develop students' capabilities in using and applying mathematics through investigative activities, but not enough is done to develop this aspect of their learning when studying other parts of the subject.
- The scheme of work does not identify where teachers can teach how applications of information and communication technology would support learning in mathematics.
- The highly popular peer tutoring initiative is an exciting and successful way in which both Year 9 and Year 11 students are improving their mathematics.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management of mathematics are good.

- The mathematics leadership team has a good understanding of the strengths of the department and a clear idea of how it wants to improve still further.
- Teamwork is strong and the informal sharing of good practice is effective.
- The monitoring and evaluation of classroom practice has improved and is now supporting improved teaching.

Subject issue: pupils' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

Students enjoy their mathematics because teachers make lessons lively and interesting, and present topics in ways that students find helpful. Students thrive on challenge, particularly in algebra. The peer tutoring sessions, involving students in Years 9 and 11, are popular and illustrate very well the enjoyment that students have for the subject. Students' understanding is good in classes where teachers ask students to explain and describe their ideas and their thinking. It is also helped when teachers carefully review with students what they have learned and make connections between different topics.

Inclusion

Inclusion is good.

- Good attention is paid to ensuring that the needs of all students are met. Occasionally the large number of boys in each class means that they dominate, particularly in class discussion, and teachers do not always deal with this successfully.

- Students with learning difficulties or disabilities receive good support, ensuring that they progress as well as others in the class.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included to:

- develop a consistent and coherent approach to enabling students to develop their capabilities in using and applying mathematics as they learn other aspects of mathematics
- review the purposes for marking students' work and produce and implement a new marking strategy that will provide better guidance to students on how to improve their mathematics
- modify the scheme of work by identifying where students can learn about the applications of information and communication technology in mathematics.

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

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Cathy Morgan
Her Majesty's Inspector