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Mr R Ballantyne
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Dear Mr Ballantyne

Ofsted 2006-07 survey inspection programme – mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 9 and 10 October 2006 to look at work in mathematics. As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on pupils' enjoyment and understanding of 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.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff, and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of parts of seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of the subject, mathematics, was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are good.

- Pupils make good progress throughout the main school and results have been consistently high for several years in both national assessments at the end of Year 9 and GCSE examinations. Boys and girls achieve equally well.
- The department has met its targets in recent years for end of Year 9 tests and GCSE examinations.
- Mathematics is a popular subject in the school and consequently many students take the subject in the sixth form.
- Results in mathematics and further mathematics A level examinations have been impressive in recent years, particularly since the department does not place minimum requirements on students embarking on these courses.

- Pupils and sixth-form students currently in the school are achieving well. They are developing good thinking and reasoning skills, especially in those classes where teachers engage them in discussion and where they are encouraged to solve extended problems. This type of activity helps ensure that understanding is developed alongside the learning of skills and routines.
- Teachers are enthusiastic about their subject and transmit this enthusiasm to learners so that pupils and students enjoy mathematics. Pupils' and students' behaviour is excellent because they are actively engaged and want to do well. They acquire good study skills.

Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching and learning are good.

- Good teaching enables pupils and students to achieve well and make good progress. Teachers make the subject interesting and respond confidently to the challenging questions often asked by learners. Close attention is paid to the needs of individuals, so that all make similarly good progress. Some teachers are particularly adept at posing questions that help learners to engage in activity and thought that leads to good levels of understanding. This is not, however, always the case. Currently there is not enough sharing of good practice in the department to help all teachers to be as successful as the best.
- Teachers mark work thoroughly and provide helpful comments so that learners know how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve. Assessment is good. A particularly impressive feature is the end-of-term procedures where pupils and students review their progress against learning objectives by setting and undertaking peer tests as part of an evaluation of how successful they have been. Records of this procedure are completed by teachers and learners, and parents are asked to contribute comments. Homework is set regularly and marked conscientiously, thus helping learners to develop good independent study skills.

Quality of the curriculum

Curriculum provision in mathematics is satisfactory.

- There is a balance between different aspects of the subject. Tasks and activities are modified to meet the needs of learners in different sets. Not enough work is undertaken, however, to develop pupils' capability in using and applying mathematics and there is no guidance, in the department, on how this should be done.
- Pupils and students do not make enough use of information and communication technology (ICT) in mathematics. Little has been done to develop and apply mathematics systematically in other curriculum areas.
- Some pupils undertake the Mathematics Challenge as an extension to their studies and others have successfully entered the Mathematics Olympiad, with notable success in individual cases.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management of the department are satisfactory.

- The department is run well on a day-to-day basis, with a good sense of teamwork. The scheme of work provides a useful framework to guide what should be taught in each year but does not provide enough guidance on how teachers can develop learners' capability in using and applying mathematics.
- Evaluation of the work of mathematics teachers, either by senior managers or the head of department, is not sufficient to identify specific strengths that could be shared or areas where teachers could improve their work. Senior managers do not hold the department to account enough and one consequence of this is that the plan for improvement in the department is not detailed enough to bring about further improvement. The school has recently acquired specialist school status for mathematics and computing, but the role of the mathematics department regarding this status needs clarifying, as does the potential impact of this status on the department.

Subject issue: pupils' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

Pupils and students generally enjoy their mathematics because teachers are enthusiastic about the subject and communicate this well. Pupils and students really like lessons that focus on 'big questions' that lead to explorations of mathematical ideas. This sort of approach helps learners gain an understanding of mathematical ideas alongside their learning of skills and routines. Not all teachers work in this way consistently enough and hence some learners gain a deeper understanding of mathematical ideas than others.

Inclusion

Good work is undertaken to ensure that all pupils and students have equality of opportunity and access to all that the department provides. Hence there is no significant difference in the achievement of different groups of pupils. The fast-tracking of gifted mathematicians is popular with the pupils involved and is successful in challenging and extending them.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- enhance the curriculum by doing more to develop pupils' capabilities in using and applying mathematics and extend the use of information and communication technology in mathematics
- develop a more rigorous programme of evaluation of the work of the department to identify strengths worth sharing with others and areas where improvement is needed
- produce a detailed plan for further development in the department, linked to the whole school plan for improvement.

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

As I explained previously, 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

George Knights
Additional Inspector