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Dear Mr Nancekievill

Ofsted 2006-07 survey inspection programme – mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 11 and 12 January 2007 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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of parts of 13 lessons.

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

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory.

- Results in national tests and examinations are broadly average and have shown improvement in recent years.
- Students gain knowledge and skills more successfully than they develop an understanding of mathematical ideas.
- Attitudes to learning mathematics are generally satisfactory, but poor behaviour by some older students slows their progress.
- The presentation of students' written work is often careless and untidy and this sometimes leads to errors being made.

Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching and learning are satisfactory.

- The quality of teaching varies considerably but is generally better in Years 7 to 9, where students are more actively involved in lessons, than in Years 10 and 11.
- Some teachers establish good working relationships and create a positive atmosphere in which students strive to do well. Other teachers find engaging or interesting students difficult and this leads to a lack of concentration.
- Whilst some teachers ask searching questions, too often they do not listen carefully to how students respond and hence do not follow up these responses in ways that help improve students' thinking skills.
- Some teachers devote too long to practice exercises; when this happens students lose interest and their progress slows.
- Teachers and teaching assistants work well together, especially when supporting students who have learning difficulties or disabilities.
- The marking of work does not provide students with enough guidance on how to improve the standard or presentation of their work.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is satisfactory.

- Departmental documentation sets out the content of courses satisfactorily but misses the opportunity to provide teachers with guidance on how to help students gain an understanding of mathematical ideas.
- Not enough attention is paid to developing students' capability in using and applying mathematics.
- The more able students take part in inter-school mathematics challenges.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are satisfactory.

- Staffing is now stable after a period of recruitment difficulties.
- There is a good sense of teamwork within the department.
- There is a clear vision and a good plan for improvement, with pertinent priorities.
- Monitoring and evaluation of the work of the department is improving but not enough attention is yet paid to evaluating the impact of teachers' work on students' learning.
- Not enough use is made of analysis of student performance to guide developments in the department.

Subject issue: pupils' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

In lessons that actively engage and interest students, attitudes are good. This is more often the case in Years 7 to 9, where students are encouraged to take part in a wider range of activities than they are in Years 10 and 11. Some teachers ask

searching questions, but too often do not give students time to refine and develop their answers. This slows the development of students' mathematical thinking and reasoning. Too rarely are students encouraged to work in pairs or small groups to address open questions that would encourage the development of their understanding of mathematical ideas. Students recognise that teachers are concerned to help them learn facts, skills and routines. They have less grasp of the potential for understanding mathematical ideas because these are not highlighted by teachers as being important. From discussions with students, it is clear that they have the potential to engage in more activities of the type that would enable them to develop their investigative and problem-solving abilities.

Inclusion

The mathematics department is committed to ensuring that all students are able to access all that it provides. Boys and girls do equally well. The grouping of students by ability helps to ensure that most are challenged sufficiently for them to achieve their potential. However, the most able students are not always provided with tasks and challenges that stretch them enough. Pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities are supported well in class, both through carefully planned activities and by the support of teaching assistants.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improve teaching and learning by developing teachers' skills in questioning and listening to students' answers, and by ensuring lessons are structured so that students spend less time on long repetitive practice exercises and more on interactive work with their teachers
- broaden the range of teaching strategies used in order to enable students to develop an understanding of mathematical ideas
- make more effective use of data analysis to guide students and to set priorities for improvements in the department.

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