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Mr K Prunty
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Dear Mr Prunty

Ofsted 2006-07 survey inspection programme – mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 22 and 23 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 nine lessons.

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

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are inadequate, overall.

- Standards at GCSE and in National Curriculum tests for Year 9 students are below average. Students make insufficient progress, particularly in Years 7 to 9. Consequently, achievement by age 16 is inadequate, particularly for boys.
- Improvements in the quality of teaching and targeted intervention are beginning to raise achievement.
- Achievement in the sixth form is good. Results are broadly average, with many who complete the A-level course making excellent progress.
- Students' attitudes towards mathematics are satisfactory, but vary widely as a consequence of inconsistencies in the quality of teaching they have received. However, whilst many are enthusiastic and behave very well, in some classes low-level disruption affects students' progress.

Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching and learning are inadequate, but improving.

- The quality of most teaching and learning is satisfactory with some good features. Evidence from students, parental questionnaires and the school's self-evaluation indicate that the quality is improving. However, some teachers have not yet developed secure relationships with all their classes. This results in inadequate learning in some lessons.
- There have been many changes in staffing in recent years. The current teachers, though inexperienced, are enthusiastic and are developing both a greater consistency of practice and a sense of excitement in lessons. However, some classes have experienced up to three different teachers so far this year which has hindered students' progress.
- In many lessons, students experience a good range of activities and are effectively encouraged to discuss their work in groups. Good use is made of practical activities and opportunities to relate mathematics to real-life.
- Computer-linked whiteboards are beginning to be used effectively to support teaching. Students enjoy using them to explain their reasoning.
- Assessment procedures are very good. Careful tracking of progress, target setting, students' self-evaluation, appropriate intervention and additional support are beginning to raise achievement. Teachers' marking is thorough. Some is exemplary, giving students clear guidance on how to improve.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is satisfactory.

- As a consequence of improved assessment procedures, there are good intervention programmes in Years 9, 10 and 11 to raise achievement. These include a National Strategy pilot 'Study Plus' group in Year 10, who receive additional lessons each week, with an emphasis on improving understanding through a programme of practical activities.
- Students indicate that limited use has been made of information and communication technology until recently. Computer-linked whiteboards, graph-plotting software and graphical calculators are now contributing to students' enjoyment and understanding in some classes.
- There is insufficient guidance in schemes of work on teaching methods. They contain no exemplar lesson plans, which could help promote the professional development of this inexperienced department.
- Large numbers of students opt for A-level mathematics in the sixth form. However, the uninformed choice between statistics and mechanics results in some very large and some very small groups. The planned introduction of AS-level further mathematics in Year 13 will enhance the curriculum offer further.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are satisfactory.

- Good use has been made of an assistant headteacher to improve the leadership and management of the department. He has introduced management procedures, such as the regular assessment of students, and enabled teachers to collaborate as an increasingly effective team.
- Good use has been made of advisory support, including that from the Local Authority, to improve the quality of teaching and raise achievement.
- The school's self-evaluation of the department is thorough and open. A detailed action plan is being implemented effectively.
- The lack of subject specialists to lead the department is a significant weakness in light of the staff's inexperience.

Subject issue: students' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

Students' views about mathematics have been affected by the quality of teaching they have received. Most value the subject and concur with their parents' views about its importance for their future. Many are enthusiastic and a large number opt for the subject at A-level. They appreciate opportunities to work in groups or pairs and recognise that they learn best when they discuss their mathematics. They enjoy using computer-linked whiteboards, which increase their understanding. Students' understanding of mathematics is less well developed in Years 7 to 9.

Inclusion

Good use of regular assessment and targeted support is beginning to raise achievement. The school produces detailed analyses of the progress of different groups of students. However, as yet, intervention programmes have not resulted in a significant improvement in the achievement of boys.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- recruit effective subject-specialist leaders to aid the promoting of good practice in order to further improve the quality of teaching and learning
- raise achievement, particularly in Year 7 to 9 and with boys in all years
- ensure all teachers adopt a range of methods, including the use of computer-linked whiteboards, and group, practical and investigative activities, which deepen students' understanding and provide them with opportunities to explain their reasoning in response to challenging questions.

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

David Bain
Additional Inspector