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Dear Dr Haworth

Ofsted 2006-07 survey inspection programme – mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit 5 and 6 February 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 students' 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 included: interviews with students and staff, nine lesson observations, and scrutiny of documentation and students' work.

The overall effectiveness of the mathematics provision is judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in mathematics is good and standards are high.

- Selection ensures that students' attainment on entry is very high. Standards remain high throughout the school, though GCSE results fell in 2006 especially at grade A*. In the last two years, students achieved well in Key Stage 3 and the Sixth Form, and satisfactorily in Key Stage 4. Achievement was good in two of the three Key Stage 4 lessons that were observed.
- Most students have positive attitudes to mathematics and are able think for themselves when faced with novel problems. Many students have well developed learning skills that allow them to make good progress provided teaching is sound.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- The effectiveness of the observed lessons was a mixture of good and satisfactory. The latter often had good features. Most teachers are trying a more open, discursive approach that requires students to think for themselves, using specific techniques to promote discussion, often to good effect.
- The best lessons were well prepared but also had an element of spontaneity because the teachers were confident enough in their subject knowledge to allow the lesson to develop from students' suggestions and questions. Some teachers are still developing their expertise in using this approach. Their lessons were based on good ideas but had some weaknesses, such as misjudging the time needed or missing opportunities to challenge the more able.
- The quality and frequency of marking is inconsistent. In the best cases teachers provide helpful comments on students' work and insist on high standards of presentation. Some students are resistant to writing out their working. This makes it difficult for them and their teachers to identify where they have gone wrong.
- The system of using sixth-formers to help in Key Stage 3 lessons holds promise, but the respective roles of the teacher and helper are not well enough defined.

Quality of the curriculum

The mathematics curriculum is satisfactory with some good aspects.

- In addition to the usual mathematics courses, the department offers a strong programme that includes GCSE Statistics and GCE Further Mathematics. The various national mathematical challenges provide good enrichment and stretch the most able.
- The recent introduction of a shortened Key Stage 3 and extended Key Stage 4 has required a revision of the schemes of work. This work is in progress but not enough attention has been given to the likely impact of recent and forthcoming national changes to the mathematics curriculum particularly at GCSE.
- Teachers are encouraged to use teaching approaches that promote greater thinking and understanding. The schemes of work include suggestions for the use of information and communication technology (ICT) and for using and applying mathematics, including Amnesty International resources that link mathematics and citizenship. However, there is only limited guidance on how to draw the key ideas from the suggested activities.
- Individual teachers often have good ideas but mechanisms to ensure consistency across the department are not well developed. Students report variability in areas like using and applying mathematics, the use of ICT in mathematics, and the use of visual aids and practical resources.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of mathematics are satisfactory.

- The head of department is a good role model and is always ready to support her colleagues. Inexperienced teachers benefit from good support and informal discussions about teaching and learning. The departmental handbook is well designed with clear policies and guidance for staff and students on a range of matters. However, not all staff consistently implement the agreed policies.
- The mathematics development plan has appropriate intentions, but actions are not always well matched to intended outcomes. Some success criteria refer to completing the action rather than achieving the intended outcome. The new approaches to teaching referred to above are not explicitly included.
- Good use is made of data analysis in relation to performance management of teachers. Line managers are aware of the key strengths of the mathematics department, and the areas for development, such as the issues of inconsistency. However, their involvement to date in departmental self-evaluation and development planning has been limited.

Subject issue: students' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

- The head of department provides a clear philosophy that mathematics should be enjoyed and understood. The teaching environment is welcoming and has been enhanced well with mathematical posters and interactive whiteboards.
- Students enjoy mathematics when their teachers are enthusiastic, know their subject well and able to explain the key ideas without getting bogged down in detail. They appreciate variety in teaching approaches, and enjoy discussing ideas in groups, playing mathematical games, and using the interactive whiteboards. They like it when teachers link ideas within mathematics and show how mathematics can be applied in the real world, though the latter happens rarely.

Inclusion

- The school's careful analysis of results has identified some underachievement among boys of Black Caribbean heritage, in line with national statistics.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- continuing to promote teaching approaches that support students' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics and their ability to think mathematically
- ensuring that the monitoring of teaching and learning is followed up with rigorous evaluation to be sure that policies, procedures and any new developments are realistic, consistently applied and achieve the desired outcomes
- using management tasks, such as scrutiny of students' work, lesson observation, and continuing development of the scheme of work, as vehicles for professional development based on reflection, collaboration and sharing good practice
- using line management to strengthen and support leadership of 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

Stephen Abbott
Her Majesty's Inspector