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Mr Chris Modi
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Dear Mr Modi

Ofsted 2006-07 survey inspection programme – mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 6 and 7 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 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 lessons.

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

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory.

- Standards at Key Stage 3 have improved in the proportion of pupils achieving the nationally expected level (Level 5) but remain slightly below average overall. This represents good progress for pupils who joined the school with prior attainment that was average or below, and satisfactory progress for those who joined the school with high prior attainment. Revision classes had a positive impact on these results.

- At Key Stage 4, focussed support and revision have also contributed to an increased proportion of pupils gaining at least grade C in mathematics GCSE. Nevertheless, overall standards remain below average. Girls with high prior attainment had made inadequate progress in 2005; this group made better progress in 2006 but it remained below their expected progress. Progress at Key Stage 4 has improved since 2005 and is satisfactory, but is lowest amongst the more able girls and boys.
- In the sixth form, students make particularly good progress at AS level, but more varied progress at A level.
- Pupils apply themselves to work satisfactorily but few show initiative and there is some misbehaviour.

Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching and learning are inadequate.

- There are too many occasions on which pupils are not given work that meets their needs. It is too easy or repetitive, delivered too slowly, or not sufficiently clearly explained to enable pupils to complete it correctly. Pupils' errors are not noticed or supported quickly enough.
- Pupils are passive in lessons and many find them boring. They are often given too little time to think, do their own work or discuss points with others. In contrast, in the sixth form, most students most make good progress because they are determined to overcome difficulties. They collaborate well together and teachers help them when they encounter any problems.
- The stronger teaching includes enjoyable activities, problems that encourage thinking and practical activities that demonstrate concepts.
- Homework is not used constructively to extend learning.
- Marking provides pupils with some positive feedback about their successes but is less effective in pinpointing how pupils could improve and in following this up. However, there are good examples of pupils using targets given during marking to inform their revision and self-assessment.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is satisfactory.

- Effective activities are developed through trials and then extended across the school, for example in data handling and in work-related learning.
- The scheme of work contains a sound range of activities. A few are compulsory and include information and communication technology (ICT), although pupils are not assured entitlement to the full range of use of ICT within mathematics.
- Pupils find helpful the extra support that teachers provide outside lessons, including the sessions for those who are approaching national assessments.
- The flexible setting of classes has enabled some resources to be targeted effectively but there is room for higher expectation in the work provided for some middle and higher sets.

- There is a strong range of enrichment activities for higher attaining pupils that have had some impact on the take-up of mathematics in the sixth form.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are satisfactory.

- There have been some improvements in pupils' standards and progress supported through targeted assistance, revision and curriculum provision.
- Technology college status has been used effectively to provide ICT and staffing resources.
- While assessment has been used to identify underperforming pupils and some measures have been put in place to raise their performance, these have not been sharp enough to ensure consistent improvement.
- Monitoring of teaching and provision is generous and insufficiently frequent. It is not focused clearly enough on bringing about gradual improvement in teaching and consistency in entitlement for pupils.
- Evaluation has identified correctly some key areas for development. Nevertheless, it does not include enough analysis of the impact of provision or link sufficiently strongly to current or future plans for action.

Subject issue: pupils' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

Many pupils find mathematics boring and have a hazy understanding of their work, even when they can complete it correctly. Too much teaching relies upon providing pupils with methods that are not firmly grounded in the conceptual understanding that underlies them.

Inclusion

Pupils are supported to make satisfactory overall progress but this is not consistent across all year groups and classes. There are too many occasions when they make inadequate progress in lessons.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising progress and standards, particularly for higher attainers
- monitoring teaching more astutely to ensure that it meets pupils' needs and improves their understanding
- sharpening the impact of assessment on pupils' progress throughout the school
- linking action planning more closely to evaluation of its impact.

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 your local learning and skills council and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Gill Close
Her Majesty's Inspector