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Dear Mr Lonsdale

Ofsted 2006-07 survey inspection programme – mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit with Angela Headon HMI on 12 and 13 March 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 made included: interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of nine lessons.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are good overall.

- The attainment of students entering the school is lower than average and English is not the first language of almost half of the students. However, by the end of Key Stage 3, the standards attained by students in national tests in mathematics are around the national average. At Key Stage 4, standards are below average but they improved in 2006.
- Students' progress in mathematics is good as they move through from Year 7 to Year 11 and no group of pupils underachieve.
- Behaviour in lessons is good. Students participate well and have a positive attitude to learning. Written work is well presented and students take an obvious pride in their work.

Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching and learning are satisfactory.

- Teachers have good classroom management skills and a sound understanding of the subject. They have a good rapport with students; this makes an important contribution to learning.
- Almost all lessons begin with challenging and varied activities that promote higher order thinking skills but the enthusiasm and interest generated is not harnessed in the rest of the lesson. In the main part of most lessons, students copy examples from the board and complete routine exercises.
- In the best lessons, questioning is used well to tease out misunderstandings and challenge the thinking of the most able students. In other lessons, a small number of students answer all the questions and others switch off.
- In less successful lessons, the work is sometimes pitched at too low a level for most of the group or the work is not adapted for students at different levels of understanding.
- Target setting is well established and central records are kept, enabling teachers to track the progress of individuals and groups. Students know their targets and how well they are progressing. There is regular testing and homework is set and marked weekly but the marking does not often provide students with clear guidance on how to improve.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is satisfactory.

- Schemes of work include suggested extension and support activities and information about resources, including appropriate software. Interactive whiteboards are widely used but students have very few opportunities to use computers.
- Support outside lessons and for revision is good. Revision classes are offered after school and in holidays and there are extra sessions for targeted groups. The additional classes supplement the teaching and learning in lessons and help to improve students' progress.
- Gifted and talented students participate in master classes in partnership with a local school, and half of the Year 11 students take GCSE statistics. The school hosts mathematics challenge events for partner primary schools in order to raise the profile of mathematics and ease the transition between Key Stages 2 and 3. There are no links with sixth forms, colleges or universities, however, to raise aspirations and encourage post-16 progression.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are good.

- Day-to-day management is sound and the team works well together. Assessment and monitoring systems are in place and there are regular audits to check that policies and systems are being followed.

- The department knows its strengths and weaknesses and is implementing a development plan with clear improvement strategies and targets.
- Lessons are observed regularly but the focus is on the teacher's performance rather than students' learning and progress. Greater attention should be given to the quality of lesson planning to ensure that the teacher has planned to meet the needs of all learners and the level of the work is appropriate.

Subject issue: pupils' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

Students say that they enjoy the variety and challenge of the activities at the start of each lesson. They also enjoy practical work, working in groups, puzzles, games and competitions. Sometimes they spend too long copying from the board or a text book and they find that some of the practice exercises are repetitive and undemanding. The most able students appreciate the links between the different areas of mathematics and are able to use alternative approaches to tackle a problem. Others are less confident about using mathematics in different situations.

Inclusion

Inclusion is outstanding. Less than half the students at the school are White British, and many of the students do not speak English as their first language. Students mix together well and show consideration and respect for each other. Three of the eight teachers in the mathematics team are from minority ethnic backgrounds. Language support is very good and teachers work extremely hard to support students who have been on extended holidays. All groups of vulnerable students, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities, make satisfactory or better progress in mathematics.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- focusing on the enjoyment of mathematics and the development of higher level thinking skills throughout the lesson, not just at the start
- ensuring all students are suitably challenged so that they reach aspirational targets
- strengthening systems to monitor and improve lesson planning.

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

Jan Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector