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Mrs Deborah Duncan
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Dear Mrs Duncan

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 May 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. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

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 eight lessons.

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

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory but improving.

Over the last few years, the department struggled to recruit suitably qualified staff which meant that some groups of students were taught by non-specialists and others had a succession of temporary teachers. This adversely affected standards and achievement. However, the department has been fully staffed throughout this academic year and national test results are expected to show a considerable improvement this summer.

- Standards have risen over the last three years but were still below average at Key Stages 3 and 4 in 2006.
- Achievement has also improved over the last few years but students did not

make the progress expected of them in 2006.
- Progress in lessons is now good and the quality of students' work and results of internal tests suggest that achievement will improve considerably this year.
- Behaviour in lessons is good. Students participate well and are keen to answer and ask questions and join in activities. A few groups take too long to settle down to work but the majority of lessons get off to a purposeful start and students work well.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in mathematics is good.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge which they use to give clear explanations and to ask probing questions that identify and disentangle any misconceptions.
- Lessons are planned very well and incorporate a wide range of learning activities including individual and group work. Good use of resources, including information and communications technology (ICT), stimulates interest and adds variety. Lessons move at a brisk pace, students participate well and make good progress.
- Target setting and monitoring is very effective. Students know their targets and how well they are performing against them. They analyse their assessment results in order to pinpoint topics that need further work. In some lessons, students are also encouraged to evaluate critically their own work and that of other students.
- Assessments are set every half term and results are recorded and analysed centrally. Homework is set weekly but the quality of the marking and feedback is too variable. At best, work is marked carefully with notes that help the student to improve but some teachers write very few constructive comments.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- There are comprehensive learning plans for each year group, supported by sample lesson plans, worksheets and overhead projector slides. These are very helpful to new teachers and those covering lessons at short notice.
- Students are encouraged to use and apply their mathematical skills through a range of extended and short tasks set in real-life and/or unfamiliar contexts.
- The curriculum is flexible and there is a carefully considered range of qualifications that meets students' needs. The most gifted mathematicians are able to take GCSE modules in Year 9 or 10; GCSE statistics is offered in Year 11; and Year 10 students take an adult numeracy qualification.
- Intervention strategies, booster classes and homework clubs are provided. There is a carefully prepared GCSE revision programme and students can access revision software via the internet which they find very useful. A parents' forum has been established to support parents who are helping their children with mathematics.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are outstanding.

- Leaders and managers have put down a strong foundation for sustainable improvement and the department has shown an excellent capacity to improve.
- The department is led and managed very well. A comprehensive handbook sets out policies and procedures very clearly. There is excellent teamwork within the department and a good blend of experience and expertise. New teachers are supported well. The team is self-critical, reflective and keen to incorporate good practice from elsewhere.
- The department's self-evaluation report is detailed and accurate. It is set out clearly and provides a very honest assessment. All members of the team are aware of the department's strengths and weaknesses and the strategies for improvement. The analysis of data is very thorough and used well. Development plans are clear and well considered. Students' opinions are sought and valued.
- The senior leadership team (SLT) knows the department well. Performance management is very good. Teachers are observed three times each year, at least once by a member of the SLT, and data on students' achievement are also used to assess teachers' performance. Members of the SLT walk around the department regularly and visit lessons. The SLT takes decisive action if a teacher continues to under-perform after receiving support.
- The school is part-way through a major rebuilding programme and mathematics is housed in temporary classrooms. This is limiting some students' access to ICT facilities during lessons and a small number of classrooms are cramped.

Subject issue: students' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

Students enjoy their mathematics lessons and rate them very highly. Many of the older students have experienced weak teaching in previous years and can identify precisely what makes a lesson effective and enjoyable. They value clear explanations that help them to understand what they are doing and why. They appreciate the benefits of working in groups and using a wide range of resources including games and the interactive whiteboard. They also enjoy solving challenging and intriguing problems using their mathematics skills.

Inclusion

Inclusion in mathematics is good. There is careful monitoring of individual's performance; those at risk of underachieving are identified quickly and supported. Good progress is recognised and celebrated. The provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities is good. They are taught in small groups with appropriate learning support and work independently, using an ICT package that personalises their learning, for part of each lesson. Gifted and talented students work at a faster pace in 'super sets' and benefit from participation in national mathematics challenges and strengthening links with the local college and university.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- continue to raise standards and improve achievement in mathematics
- improve the quality and consistency of marking and feedback.

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