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Mrs Calderbank
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Dear Mrs Calderbank

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Evaluation of the Primary and Secondary National Strategies

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 25 - 26 September 2007 to look at work in the Secondary National Strategy (SNS).

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the SNS, the visit had a particular focus on the impact of assessment for learning (AfL) and quality of programmes for disengaged/disaffected pupils.

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. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

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 eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of the SNS was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' achievement is satisfactory. The impact of AfL on pupils' achievement and personal development is also satisfactory.

- Standards at both key stages are good.
- Pupils make satisfactory progress in mathematics at both key stages. Progress is stronger in mathematics than it is in most other subjects.
- The progress of lower attaining pupils is satisfactory overall. It is strongest in Key Stage 4 because the curriculum is appropriate, there is an increased emphasis on achieving targets and more intervention.
- Achievement has improved because the mathematics department uses AfL well to target pupil weaknesses.
- Pupils assess and evaluate their learning and teachers respond well to these.

Quality of teaching and learning in mathematics

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory. The impact of AfL on teaching and learning is also satisfactory.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge although they are not sufficiently aware of appropriate outcomes for the full ability range in lessons.
- In the better lessons, teachers made learning interactive. Misconceptions and investigative work were generally handled appropriately. However, pupils disliked lessons in which teachers talked for too long and reduced the opportunities for them to work independently.
- There were good opportunities for pupils to assess their own work using level descriptors and against learning objectives. Peer assessment was less evident.
- Teachers' feedback to pupils in lessons and the marking of work in books was inconsistent.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- The curriculum is broad and meets statutory requirements.
- The department consistently analyses pupils' weaknesses and plans lessons in response to their findings.
- A good range of vocational options are available at Key Stage 4 so pupils can see more clearly how mathematics is applied in the real world. However, links to vocational options are rarely made in mathematics lessons.
- There is good general guidance on AfL. However, schemes of work are inconsistent in the support they give teachers in planning different outcomes for pupils of different abilities.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management of mathematics are satisfactory.

- Despite some discontinuity in recent years the head of department and second in department have ensured that all staff are kept fully aware of NS developments, including regular training on AfL.
- The mathematics department is improving, with outcomes ahead of most other departments in the school.
- Initiatives are monitored so the school is aware of how well they are implemented.
- Although an important start has been made on improving the tracking of pupil progress, particularly at Key Stage 4, the school continues to lack a rigorous approach to evaluation.
- There is considerable potential for further improvement because the department has the required teaching and learning expertise.

Assessment for learning

The impact of AfL is satisfactory.

- The school has implemented some aspects of AfL well resulting in gradually improving progress. However, other important elements of AfL, such as teachers' skilful questioning and the management of responses, are not yet consistently practised.
- A systematic analysis of pupils' tests and tasks is used appropriately to identify appropriate lessons and programmes of support.
- Pupils appreciate opportunities to evaluate their learning and the subsequent teachers' responses.
- Pupils have insufficient opportunity to make choices that would allow greater concentration on the more challenging aspects of mathematics.

The quality of programmes for disaffected pupils

The quality of programmes for disaffected pupils is satisfactory.

- The rate of progress of disaffected pupils and their personal development is satisfactory overall. The rate of progress is significantly better at Key Stage 4. Absence and exclusion rates are improving.
- The curriculum at Key Stage 4 provides a range of vocational and alternative courses that meet the needs of these pupils.
- National strategy resources, including LA consultants, have provided effective training for staff.
- Interventions aimed at this group tend to be focussed at Key Stage 4 with insufficient 'preventative' work in Key Stage 3.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- developing a whole school approach to monitoring teaching and learning that increases consistency and eradicates inadequate practice
- using AfL to ensure pupils have greater choice of activities and more opportunity to discuss their learning
- implementing a more preventative approach to work with disaffected/underachieving pupils.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop mathematics and assessment for learning in the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, 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

Kevin Sheldrick
Her Majesty's Inspector