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Dr C Carpenter  
Headteacher  
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Dear Dr Carpenter

Ofsted 2007-08 survey inspection programme – mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 5 and 6 November 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, observation of nine lessons and observation of a mathematics assembly.

The overall effectiveness of mathematics was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Students' achievement is outstanding. Standards are high.

- Standards at GCSE and in National Curriculum tests are high. Students arrive at the school with standards which, overall, are well above average and continue to make excellent progress in all years. In 2007, over two thirds of students attained at least Level 7 by the end of Year 9 and well over two fifths grades A\* or A at GCSE.
- Students are very enthusiastic. They are interested in mathematics and recognise its importance in their future economic well-being. They enjoy the challenge mathematics provides and find it satisfying. One said, 'once you've solved a problem, you feel quite proud of yourself.'

- Large numbers opt to study mathematics post-16. About a third of those who left in 2007 are now studying it at AS level, some already having successfully completed the first module of the examination whilst in Year 11.
- Becoming a specialist mathematics and computing college has enhanced the profile of mathematics. A group of senior students lead the school's outreach work. They run workshops and clubs in primary schools, provide activities for Year 7 and 8 registration periods, organise mathematics challenge days and assemblies. They speak enthusiastically of the skills they have developed working as a team. Some of them have experienced difficulties in learning mathematics and, therefore, 'we recognise problems others have in grasping concepts.' They also said, 'it has helped us develop our listening skills and our confidence.'

### Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching and learning are outstanding.

- A young and relatively inexperienced team of teachers have successfully changed students' attitudes towards mathematics and significantly improved results through working closely together to share good practice and enhance the quality of teaching and learning.
- Teachers are enthusiastic about the subject. Their lessons are extremely well-structured and engage students in a wide variety of activities at a good pace. However, they recognise that opportunities to encourage independent learning, collaboration and the use of information and communication technology could be enhanced.
- A real strength of the department is the emphasis placed on students explaining their reasoning in response to probing questions. Consequently, students talk about their work with confidence, ask questions when they are unsure and are not afraid to be wrong.
- Assessment is rigorous and marking exemplary. Students know what they need to do to improve. Peer and self assessment are used effectively. Some teachers are currently trialling a system where parents respond regularly to the marking.

### Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is outstanding.

- Schemes of work are comprehensive and regularly reviewed. Good use is made of technology to make the schemes interactive and to share plans of successful lessons across the department.
- The breadth of the curriculum is outstanding. Statistics is offered alongside mathematics in Years 10 and 11, as is the first core module of AS-level mathematics to challenge the most able. A mix of linear and modular GCSE courses are used effectively to meet the needs of different groups of students. In order to increase the proportion of students achieving grade A\* at GCSE, early entry has been restricted. Students experience regular problem-solving and investigative lessons from Year 7, although opportunities to integrate such activities in other lessons have yet to be developed fully.

## Leadership and management

Leadership and management are outstanding.

- Outstanding leadership and management have provided a clear direction for development which has significantly raised attainment and changed students' attitudes towards mathematics.
- Departmental self-evaluation is extremely rigorous, as is the tracking of students' progress. The way in which the department has addressed issues identified through school reviews and external monitoring is exemplary.

Subject issue: pupils' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

Students' attitudes towards mathematics are extremely positive. They find it interesting, but challenging. One said, 'it's good to develop skills and show them off,' and others agreed they found the work rewarding. 'It is,' one stated, 'the most useful subject.' Students recognise that the emphasis placed on explaining their reasoning enhances their understanding and confidence. They can identify other aspects of effective teaching and appreciate opportunities to work together, solve problems and apply their mathematics to real life. Year 9 students spoke enthusiastically of an experiment in independent learning, where groups had presented their findings to business executives.

## Inclusion

Excellent targeted support enables students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to make excellent progress and to achieve well at GCSE. In 2007, all students in Year 11 achieved at least grade D and 93 per cent grade C or better. Grouping students by ability is used effectively to ensure all students achieve highly, with additional teachers allocated to lower ability groups to address their specific needs, and an array of enrichment activities to challenge all abilities.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- further develop initiatives which enhance students' skills in problem solving, independently and collaboratively, in all lessons.

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

David Bain  
Additional Inspector