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Mr Carl Hunt  
Acting Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Hunt

Ofsted 2007-08 survey inspection programme – mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 4 and 5 October 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. 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 parts of eight lessons.

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

Achievement and standards

Achievement is good. Standards are above average.

- Results in national tests at the end of Year 9 have been above average in recent years. They have exceeded targets and represent good progress for the students concerned. Students currently in the school are also achieving above average standards in their work.
- Students gain a good understanding of mathematical ideas alongside their acquisition of knowledge and development of skills. This reflects the department's priorities in its overall planning of mathematics lessons.
- Students have good attitudes to learning because teachers make lessons interesting and challenging; and they gain satisfaction from their achievements.

## Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching and learning are good.

- Teachers are confident in their knowledge of the subject and are thus able to present lessons that are lively and stimulating.
- Most teachers question students skilfully, listening to students' answers and responding accordingly. This aids students' understanding of ideas, whilst improving their thinking and reasoning abilities as they develop their mathematical language.
- Teachers establish very good working relationships and create a positive atmosphere in which students strive to do well. In most lessons, students remain focused on their mathematics and only lose concentration when, occasionally, teachers allow tasks to go on too long.
- Teachers mark students' work and give them good oral feedback on how well they are doing and how they can improve the quality of their work. Students know their individual targets and how nearly they are achieving them; this motivates them to do well.
- Some, but not all, teachers assess how well students are doing by circulating around the room to observe and listen while students are working individually or in pairs. By so doing, they are able to modify or extend activities to meet students' needs well.
- In some lessons, text exercises or other activities are allowed to continue for too long and, when this happens, then momentum of students' work slows.

## Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is good.

- The faculty's documentation sets out the content of courses clearly and guides teachers to use a range of investigative and problem-solving approaches that aid the development of students' understanding.
- Good use is made of texts and other commercially produced materials to present a wide range of topics in an interesting and stimulating way. However, sometimes, too much reliance is placed on students working individually on extended text exercises when other, more interactive, approaches would be more effective.
- Some use is made of information and communication technology to support learning in mathematics, but students do not use software, such as spreadsheets, as a tool in their work.

## Leadership and management

Leadership and management are good.

- The head of the department has created a good sense of teamwork amongst the mathematics teachers.

- The department's evaluation of its current position is thorough and accurate and has been used to build a clear set of priorities for further improvement, to which all members of the department are committed.
- Detailed observation of teaching and learning has helped to identify strengths and areas where improvement is needed. However, because teachers do not get to see one another teach, they do not have the opportunity to observe the best practice in the department and thus have a restricted awareness of what is possible and what they should be striving for.
- Good use is made of the range of resources available in the department.

Subject issue: pupils' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

Students enjoy learning mathematics. They indicate, by their comments and responses in lessons, that they really enjoy achieving well, for instance when succeeding in an investigation or in a problem-solving activity. They value the opportunities to work together in pairs, though this does not occur regularly in all lessons. Some teachers are adept at asking searching and probing questions. The best teachers also listen carefully to students' responses and then ask follow-up questions that aid students' thinking and reasoning. Through this questioning, and in pair and group work, students develop a language to describe and explain their thinking and thus their understanding of mathematical ideas increases. As they talk about their work, students also become more confident in their grasp of the mathematics they are studying. They appreciate the efforts their teachers make to help them learn facts, skills and routines and recognise the success they have in these aspects of the subject. In addition, departmental policy is that a wide range of investigative and problem-solving approaches should be used within the context of learning all aspects of the subject. This enhances students' capability in using and applying mathematics and builds up their grasp of mathematical concepts.

### Inclusion

The mathematics department ensures that all students are able to have access to all that it provides. Boys and girls do equally well. The grouping of students by ability helps to ensure that most are challenged sufficiently for them to achieve their potential, though the most able are not always stretched. Students with learning difficulties or disabilities are supported well in class, both through carefully planned activities and by the support of specialist teachers and teaching assistants.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- develop a programme of peer and joint observation of mathematics lessons in order to identify and share best practice so that all lessons are as good as the best currently being provided.

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

George Knights  
Additional Inspector