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Mr Alan Gilhooley
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Dear Mr Gilhooley

Ofsted 2007-08 survey inspection programme – mathematics

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 15 and 16 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.

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 five lessons.

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

Achievement and standards

Standards are well above average and achievement is outstanding.

- Standards and achievement have improved markedly over the last five years from below average to well above average in 2007. Pupils make excellent progress from broadly average starting points on joining the school.
- Early indications are that the results for mathematics GCSE in 2007 are well above national figures. All pupils were entered, 72% gained a grade C or higher, with almost all gaining at least grade E, and an average proportion gaining a grade A or A*. Approximately half the pupils who gained a Level 5 in their Key Stage 3 tests in 2005 gained a grade C or better.

- Results of the Key Stage 3 tests show continuing improvements with nearly all pupils gaining at least Level 5, the standard expected at age 14 years.
- Pupils know their targets, which are challenging, and also how to achieve them. Staff adjust them in response to individual needs, often raising them to provide even greater challenge.
- Pupils enjoy mathematics; staff are very supportive and there is a nurturing atmosphere within lessons. In response, behaviour is excellent. Pupils have the opportunity through a survey to give their views on mathematics in the school.
- Mathematics plays an important part in the preparation of pupils' future economic welfare. Because they achieve very well, they are well placed to engage with mathematics beyond school with many taking A level or using their mathematics in other A level courses.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is outstanding.

- Excellent relationships between staff and pupils and between pupils are based on mutual trust and respect. Pupils are extremely polite; when participating in group work or responding to questions they listen attentively to others so that at no time do pupils feel intimidated. This ensures all are prepared to contribute answers or comments.
- Lessons are well planned. The department works very cohesively: teaching ideas are discussed, demonstrated and trialled. This also ensures excellent support for new members of the department. Pupils have opportunities to lead lessons when revising for examinations or tests. This is particularly effective in giving them greater ownership and also making sure revision activities meet their needs.
- Assessment is excellent. Teachers are expert at using questions to ascertain the extent to which pupils have understood the exposition. They monitor the work of pupils in class by constantly moving among them to identify anyone who has an error or a misconception, so they can be helped immediately. They use time well at the end of lessons to check how well pupils have progressed, including asking pupils how well they feel they have achieved, and why. Books are constructively marked, identifying errors and giving support on how to overcome them.
- Teachers ensure pupils give full reasons for their answers. Responses are often followed with prompts and further questions such as 'So what?', 'What does that mean?', 'Is that a convincing argument?' or 'What do the rest of you think?'
- Information and communication technology (ICT) is used appropriately to enhance learning and is being extended to incorporate greater opportunities.
- Praise and rewards are used well to motivate pupils with their work.
- Good use is made of teaching assistants to support pupils in lessons.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- Clear schemes of work identify tasks and include suggestions for investigations to stimulate interest and engage pupils. They also include appropriate references to the use of ICT. Teachers plan for individual lessons and while these are often shared and demonstrated with other members of the department, they are not always collated to enhance the schemes of work. Planning includes the use, but not over-reliance, of textbooks which are available for all pupils.
- Work is well matched to the needs of pupils; their excellent achievement shows that it is challenging as well as supportive. Additional key skill lessons are provided for pupils in Year 8 and 9.
- The revised scheme for Key Stage 4 includes suitable work to enhance elements of using and applying mathematics. It ensures that all pupils are entered for the appropriate tier to ensure that they all are suitably challenged.
- Support for pupils with their preparation for GCSE includes well structured revision alongside learning new elements of the syllabus. Pupils commented that they found this very useful and are given opportunities to develop the revision programme with their teachers. Pupils appreciate the regular 'drop in' sessions provided by the department and say that this is a much used facility by all pupils.
- The school has a very comprehensive overview and policy for numeracy across the curriculum that highlights where cooperation between departments could enhance the work of pupils; for example solution of equations and correct manipulation of algebraic expressions and equations in science and mathematics. However, this could be further enhanced by considering departments who use other areas of mathematics; for example, considering a group on data handling, incorporating work from geography, science, PE and citizenship.
- The school works well with post-16 establishments and partner primary schools. Pupils new to the school often comment that they do not enjoy mathematics. As well as tackling any negative attitudes quickly, the school has identified that this is an area for further attention when working with partner schools

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are outstanding.

- The extremely strong drive and commitment of the highly effective subject leader have been pivotal to the improvements to pupils' achievement. Standards have risen consistently over the last five years; there is a very clear expectation that all members of the department will challenge pupils.
- While the department targets pupils around the key borderline grades and levels, results show they are successful at raising the performance of all pupils.
- The work of the department is systematically monitored by observing lessons and analysing work within books. This is used to highlight areas to

develop. The department works together to bring about the necessary improvements. It is not complacent and is keen to improve further. It has formulated an appropriate improvement plan, incorporating support from the LA consultant.

- Clear departmental policies and procedures are implemented consistently.
- Very good support is provided by the subject leader, including for new staff, who in turn subsequently help more established colleagues, for instance in developing exciting ways of introducing topics. Excellent use is made of departmental meeting time each week to share and model teaching ideas.

Subject issue: pupils' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

Pupils enjoy mathematics. In a recent survey, pupils said they most enjoyed games within lessons, using ICT, solving problems and discussions. They gave 'too much writing' as their least favourite activity. The department has taken these views into account to ensure pupils regularly have discussions within lessons and increased opportunities for ICT, although rooming arrangements still limit opportunities for hands-on work. Excellent relationships and respect for each other help ensure lessons are enjoyable. Teachers regularly plan activities that give pupils more ownership of their learning, for example getting them to lead revision classes.

Very strong emphasis on correct usage of mathematical language and on getting pupils to explain fully their reasoning or methodology when answering questions develops good understanding of the topic and its links to other areas of mathematics. Pupils said the variety of activities, especially fun tasks, helped them with their understanding, as well as the ability to ask teachers if they were stuck. The constant assessment of pupils when working in class also enables teachers to identify quickly and help any pupils who are struggling or have a misconception. Teachers' very good subject knowledge equips them to recognise quickly what the misconception is, and take appropriate action.

Inclusion

Inclusion is outstanding: all pupils are challenged to achieve as highly as possible. All are entered for GCSE mathematics; schemes of work are very well matched to their needs. Very good support is given to pupils at all times as well as in preparation for examinations. Pupils with learning difficulties receive additional support and the sports college works well to build their self esteem. Staff from the PE department support some of these pupils in mathematics or key skills lessons, which builds their confidence. Support from teaching assistants is coordinated well and enhances the work within classrooms.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- build upon the schemes of work by consistently recording teaching strategies which have been successful when teaching specific topics or lessons

- extend the work on numeracy across the curriculum to include a consistent approach to specific areas of work, for example data handling.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop mathematics.

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

Michael Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector